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LIVESTOCK AUCTION BRINGS COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Uniontown, PA – Not even a torrential downpour could put a damper on what was a record-breaking year for the Fayette County Fair’s annual 4-H Livestock Auction.

A global network of youth organizations, 4-H aims to help youth reach their full potential through a variety of programs. Its name represents four personal development areas: head, heart, hands and health.

On the last Friday of the fair each year, local businesses, organizations and individuals are asked to support the auction and, in turn, support its youth members. More than 1,000 people packed the fair’s indoor arena for this year’s festivities.

According to 4-H Extension Educator Jennifer Deichert, the auction, which dates back to the 1960s, is the culmination of members’ market animal projects.

“They raise these animals, complete project books, keep budgets tracking the expenses associated with feeding and caring for the animal, and then use that information to figure out their profits once the animal is sold,” Deichert said.

With hundreds of livestock projects completed each year, including steer, lamb, goat and swine, 4-Hers learn about the importance of protecting animal welfare, providing a safe and wholesome food supply and protecting the credibility of the animal industries they represent.

“It’s giving them that real-world experience and shows them how adults in the industry can turn those skills into a profitable business, which is part of the basis for 4-H in general,” Deichert said.

4-H member Hayden Demniak was excited to participate in his 10th livestock auction Friday, having won multiple awards at this year’s fair, including: Reserve Champion Breeding Ewe; Grand Champion Market Goat; Reserve Champion Middleweight Lamb; Champion Lamb Showman; and Reserve Supreme Champion Showman.

“This experience is bittersweet, because you’re saying goodbye to these animals that did a lot of good for you. You build a connection with these animals and kind of grow up with them, so it’s basically like getting a new pet, but your time with them is temporary,” Demniak said. “I just always tell myself to remember the good times you had with the animals, because the memories last forever. You just have to move on, put your love into another animal and keep on going.”

While Demniak, 18, of Carmichaels said he hasn’t established a consistent relationship with an annual buyer, his decade of auction participation has allowed him to start saving for college. He plans to study animal science at West Virginia University this fall.

“About half of it has gone to my education fund, and the other half goes back into the animals, so we can buy more and pay off any bills we racked up raising them,” he said. “It’s been a crazy rollercoaster of ups and downs, but I wouldn’t trade this experience for the world. If I could go back and start 4-H over at 8 years old again, I would.”

Deichert said the auction also helps support members’ college ventures through the 4-H Livestock Scholarship Fund, which awards thousands of dollars to 4-H youth annually.

Auction buyers indicate their intended processor when registering and bid on animals based on price per pound, as indicated in the sale catalog. Any purchase amount over fair market value is considered a donation, and successful bidders may donate the animal back, with proceeds going to the scholarship fund.

“I think the auction is a great way for local businesses to support 4-H and show their dedication to community involvement,” she said. “The children themselves have to invite buyers to come to the sale, so they’re also learning to do their own promotion and public relations, which makes this experience the whole package.”

4-H members present their buyers with a baseball cap and photo as small tokens of their appreciation. Bidders also get a taste of the farm-to-table process, with 4-Hers serving refreshments throughout the auction.

“I think most local businesses like to support local youth, and since 4-H kids are just great kids who are really turning into productive members of society, I think businesses like to support that progress also,” Deichert said.

Tom Jamieson, owner of Walnut Hill Shop’n’Save, Connellsville’s Cash Saver and a dozen other stores throughout Pennsylvania and West Virginia, has been a familiar face at the livestock auction for about 20 years. Seated quietly among the bustling crowd, he purchased quite a few of the almost 300 animals up for auction Friday.

“This is all about the kids. You look at them up there with their animals that they’ve worked their butts off to raise and have become their pets, and it can be hard, so we want to support them as much as we can,” Jamieson said. “They’re part of the community; we’re part of the community; and they shop in our stores. I only wish more supermarkets came out to this.”

All animals may be purchased for personal use, company dinners and picnics or, if processed according to federal regulations, restaurant and market use.

“I like to give the 4-H kids some pointers and try to help them when I can, because this is just a great organization,” Jamieson said. “Local is everything. I wish everything I bought was local, so this is the one time a year we take advantage of being able to buy really great, local products. Still, the thing I’m most excited about tonight is the kids - always the kids. There’s nothing better than that.”

4-Her Leigha Diamond, 19, is one of those kids who understands and appreciates the entire market animal process. Now in her 10th and final year of 4-H, she is studying sonography at Westmoreland County Community College.

“Selling your animals is definitely a hard experience at first, but then you realize it’s just a way of life,” Diamond said. “It’s a business. It’s what my family does and what all farmers have to do. It’s just a very rewarding experience to raise an animal and see what you can accomplish with it.”

A Belle Vernon area resident, Diamond received a fourth place award for her steer and fifth place for her pig at this year’s fair. She said her favorite part of the entire fair and livestock auction experience is being able to meet people from all over Fayette County and beyond.

This year’s auction raked in more than \$525,000, a new record for the local 4-H program. As a thunderstorm gave way to a double rainbow stretched across the entire fairgrounds, Diamond said she’s extremely grateful for all the opportunities 4-H has given her.

“This week has definitely been bittersweet, because it’s my last fair with 4-H, so I took the whole week off from work to enjoy it and spend time with my animals,” she said. “People come from all over to participate in this auction and this fair, with all its amazing shows, rides and food, so I definitely think this is what puts Fayette County on the map.”

For more information on Fayette County 4-H, visit www.extension.psu.edu. To learn more about the annual Fayette County Fair, visit www.fayettefair.com.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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