

Impact

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Unique lease-a-goat program increases 4-H participation, changes lives

With its affordable and easy access to raising goats and sheep, Gunnison County Extension's Get Your Goat 4-H Club offers members a unique way to participate in livestock projects.

Issue

In 1996, Ann Bertschy moved to Gunnison to raise Cashmere goats. New to the enterprise, she quickly learned that goats are easier to handle when imprinted on humans. She also learned that baby goats enjoy playing with children. As a result, Bertschy wanted to find children who were interested in raising the goats. Fortunately, Bertschy's ranch is accessible by school bus and located just three-and-a-half miles outside of town. With the ranch, barn, pens, equipment, and goat herd, the ranch is ready-made for raising animals. Instinctively, she turned to Gunnison County Extension 4-H as a resource for recruiting youth who might be interested in the project.

Extension's Response

When Bertschy approached Gunnison County Extension, they immediately saw a unique opportunity to connect town-based 4-Hers to agriculture. Young people without the means to raise animals for 4-H livestock projects miss out on developing a unique set of skills that can carry them through life. As a result, Gunnison County 4-H collaborated with Bertschy to create an afterschool livestock breeding program that has evolved into the 4-H *Get Your Goat Club*.

Through the *Get Your Goat Club*, 4-Hers lease goats and sheep for \$1 a month.¹ Younger members mostly raise baby goats or sheep and show them at fair. More experienced members often take on more responsibility by breeding their leased goat or sheep and raising an entire family. To participate, 4-Hers, their parents and Bertschy all sign a lease agreement that outlines their collective roles and responsibilities. 4-Hers commit to six hours of monthly chores such as barn and warm room cleaning, imprinting, vaccinating, hoof trimming, feeding, halter breaking, kidding, weaning, combing fiber, and learning to properly show animals. The nominal monthly fee helps Bertschy cover the cost of feed, vaccinations and other animal care needs, and makes the program affordable to all families.

Gunnison County Extension worked closely with Bertschy to modify breeding project activities and curricula so they were more responsive to the unique needs of *Get Your Goat Club* members:

- Extension adjusted the livestock project record book to more accurately reflect club member inventory and expense needs. *Get Your Goat* 4-Hers don't incur the amount and kind of animal care expenses typical of most livestock projects.
- Extension developed a special workshop on ethical animal care which complements required Meat Quality Assurance trainings.



The Bottom Line

- By collaborating with goat rancher Ann Bertschy to create an affordable animal leasing program, Gunnison County Extension 4-H expanded participation in its livestock program.
- The *Get Your Goat* club gives youth with little to no farm or ranch experience the chance to raise and breed livestock for exhibition while building skills, such as decision making, record keeping, empathy and teamwork, for life.

Impact

The *Get Your Goat Club* has increased the number of young people exposed to agriculture in Gunnison County through its affordable and convenient livestock leasing program. For the past five years, between 50 to 60 members, ages eight to 18, have annually participated in the club.

Bertschy's commitment to her club members' success has helped 4-Hers develop important life skills such as compassion, respect for self and others, and responsible decision-making. Her passion for breeding goats and producing the highest quality fiber has also helped club members do well at fairs. In 2010, a young doeling placed reserve grand champion at the State Fair. Following this success, the State Fair judge made a surprise visit to the goat ranch a few days later because he was so impressed by club members' project efforts.

For some club members, the opportunity to raise and breed animals has helped develop leadership skills, academic focus and a professional goal. Holly Mask, a sophomore studying animal sciences at Colorado State University, joined the club when she was eight years old. She says she learned to raise goats from older female members who later inspired her to take on that same mentoring and leadership role. In doing so, she gained a new appreciation for her mentors and the need for patience when working with younger members. In her 10 years with the club, Mask ran a goat breeding project with her younger sister, expanded her interests to include wool judging, and decided to become a large animal veterinarian.

“Ann is going to push you out of the nest to make you do the things you need to grow. That’s a lot of what 4-H is about. You try these new things and get acquainted with them, and you can have all the help you need from adults, but you’re also going to do it yourself and you’re going to learn.”

-Holly Mask

Sophomore at CSU studying animal sciences and former Get Your Goat Club member

¹ In 2002, Bertschy added 4 bred Shetland ewes to her operation. She now has 8 rams and 26 ewes in her flock.

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