

Operation 4-H

By Kelli Armbruster, Burlington, Okla.

As she eats her breakfast, an 11-year-old 4-H'er packs her bag for school and thinks about the activities she has planned for today. In Korea, 14 hours and more than 6,500 miles away, her father is settling down for bed. As she waits for her father's return, she will make new friends and work on her citizenship project as a member of the Fort Sill 4-H Club.

"Four-H teaches youth life skills such as decision-making, goal-setting, leadership and citizenship, just to name a few," said Charles Cox, Oklahoma 4-H program leader. "It welcomes all young people to participate in a 'learn-by-doing' environment where they are able to actively participate in hands-on experiences and make a lasting impact in their communities."

According to the Oklahoma 4-H Web site, the mission of the 4-H Youth Development Program is to provide youth, families and communities with educational programs that will inspire youth and adults to reach their fullest potential.

Four-H provides community-based learning through clubs, school enrichment programs, special interest programs and mass media. The program helps foster leadership and volunteerism. Members are encouraged to develop skills in their particular areas of interest by taking part in project areas such as photography, robotics, horticulture and beef production.

"While 4-H helps youth develop life skills, it also offers opportunities for youth to meet others with similar interests," said Alan VanDeventer, Oklahoma 4-H military liaison. "Four-H provides a base of friendship children can take from club meetings to the classroom. Four-H also can provide a base of support and familiarity for kids whose families are constantly on the move."

Through a partnership created in 1995 between the National 4-H Headquarters, the U.S. Army Child and Youth Services, and the U.S. Air Force Family Member Program, military children worldwide are given the opportunity "to make the best better" as members of 4-H clubs on military bases.

With the support of the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, military staff and volunteers provide quality developmental programs for children so their military mothers and fathers can pursue their assignments with less worry.

The U.S. Army's goal was to establish 4-H programs on 75 percent of its installations by 2001. By the year's end, 90 percent of bases had established a program. By 2002, the Army required 4-H clubs on every base, and in 2004, the U.S. Air Force followed. In 2003, 4-H military liaisons were named in each state to support the work that CSREES and 4-H were doing.

"It is a commitment of the Oklahoma 4-H program to develop a lasting partnership with the Air Force bases and Army posts in Oklahoma," said Cox. "We are dedicated to developing a strong 4-H presence on all military installations in Oklahoma, along with Reserve and National Guard families across the state."

Oklahoma's five military installations are located in five different counties. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service educators in each of these counties work with 4-H members and volunteers within that county, including clubs established on military bases.

"Tinker, Altus and Vance Air Force bases have established a 4-H presence," said VanDeventer. "The Fort Sill Army Post and the McAlester Ammunition Depot 4-H clubs are thriving."

Fort Sill Army Post established its first 4-H club in 2000 and has seen its enrollment soar to 248 members participating in 4-H activities at any one time. Some of the first clubs established at Fort Sill were gardening clubs. The members learned about plants, tilled the soil, cared for the plants and harvested the fruit. From gardening to aerospace, the club has branched into several special-interest clubs, including the Gourmet Grub Club, the Stamping Club, and the Health and Science Club.

"Here at Fort Sill, we incorporate 4-H into our youth services' after-school programs," said Anna Cochran, Fort Sill junior team adviser. "When these kids leave school every day, they have the opportunity to come to our youth center and hang out until their parents get home. That gives the youth center a chance to incorporate 4-H into their everyday lives and gives our 4-H members a chance to work on their 4-H projects."

"I see these kids come to the center after having moved around a lot in their lifetime," said Cochran. "They come in as very shy individuals, but after spending time at the center, their confidence increases as they begin to make new friends."

Alyssa Bwerly visits the youth center every day. Bwerly, whose father is stationed in Korea, is a new 4-H member. Her family was transferred to Fort Sill after being stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas.

"Going to the youth center every day helped me to make friends, and I get to work on cool projects like the Boulevard of Lights project," said Bwerly. "Our 4-H club worked on a float for the Boulevard of Lights, which was a parade that the city of Lawton put on during November."

The McAlester Ammunition Depot has seen its club participation increase as a result of activities such as county speech contests, Share-the-Fun contests, the county fair and shooting sports events. Club members actively participate in photography, computer science, fine arts, citizenship, fishing and other projects.

"Though 4-H provides military children with a sense of home and new friends, it is vital to developing life skills such as public speaking, leadership and citizenship skills," said Cox. "Specific project areas help youth develop interests in what we hope will later be career paths."

According to the national 4-H Web site, these clubs are not just providing something for kids to do after school; they are providing a network of support to children who need a form of stability in their lives. Many of the children's usual support systems may no longer be available due to parents being deployed and to the constant threat of losing a loved one. Extensive media coverage of on-going military operations creates daily anxiety. Four-H provides a way for youth to connect with other youth who are experiencing similar situations. They are able to seek friends and adults who can empathize and help them cope with their new world.

"It's familiar," said VanDeventer. "For some of these kids, it's about the only thing constant in their lives. To be in a foreign country and be able to recognize the green 4-H clover gives a child a sense of comfort and home."

Alyssa Bwerly, Fort Sill 4-Her, spends her afternoons at the Fort Sill Youth Center working on homework and her 4-H citizenship project. (photo courtesy of U.S. Army)