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Growing up in 4-H has been a big part of Amy Forrester's life.

Now as an adult and parent, Forrester wants to instill the learning values that 4-H has to offer, that were an important part of her childhood, to benefit her own kids.

"4-H is not just about animals," Forrester said. "It teaches leadership, skill building and communication, which leads to a lot of responsibility in life."

The Willits-based Forrester clan leases property which holds their animal barn. The ranch lies off a dusty road located down a few winding roads outside of town.

Once the door to the barn is popped open, another world is revealed. Animals grunt in harmony, and flies are drawn to the stench of feces left behind. A cat appears, rubbing up against its owners.

Daughter Caitlyn, 15, and son Grant, 8, now dedicate most of their free time to the animals within the barn. They both identify with the animals as family. Instead of working summer jobs, both put in a minimum of two or three hours a day.

Caitlyn pushes this year's project, Doc, an Angus steer, from the shade and shelter of the barn out into the hot summer sun. He is reluctant, of course. Once outside, Caitlyn cares for him, brushing his hide and spraying his body with an animal-friendly fly repellent.

Raising a steer is what Caitlyn enjoys the most, because they have a lot of personality, she said, although she has also had goats, sheep, rabbits and chickens.

Forrester said that 98 percent of the time it's up to the kids to run their own project. April through August is the busy season.

Each year, families like the Forresters' buy animals to raise for sale and fair competitions.

Before auctioning the animals off, 4-H members typically compete against one another in fair shows around the county, said Nadine Boer, vice president of the Mendocino County 4H Council. Judges award ribbons to those on subjects like keeping the correct height or weight of the animal.

Caitlyn won the sheep competition in a fair last year, something she has been working toward for a long time, and which was a huge accomplishment for her, Forrester said.

"Being involved in 4-H provides a greater understanding of the agricultural world," Boer said. "I believe our next agricultural leaders will be coming into the industry because of 4--H."

Although 4-H greatly involves animals, people interested in extracurricular activities can also join the group, Boer said. Participants can become involved in crafts and community service opportunities as well.

Caitlyn, who is 11 years into her 4-H career, hopes to one day attend college and learn how to become a veterinarian, something she said wouldn't have been possible without the help of 4-H. She saves the money she makes from selling her animals at auction. One day, that money could fund her education, she

said, along with scholarship possibilities offered by 4-H.

"More people should get involved," Caitlyn said. "It's a great experience, and you learn a lot of responsibility with the animals."

Grant has been involved in 4-H for the last three years. If he has his way, he will be participating in 4-H for the rest of his life, he said. His specialty has been raising goats, although he has also had rabbits in the past.

"The fun part is the fair; you can see a lot of your friends and spend a lot of time with your animals," Grant said.

Jennifer Seward, CEO of the Redwood Empire Fair, described 4-H in the Mendocino County community as a priceless opportunity.

"We live in a community with limited opportunities for our children," Seward said.

When 4-H is over for the year, Forrester said the atmosphere around the barn is depressing with the loss of the animals, although the planning phase begins for next year.

A holiday-like celebration begins when the family meets their new animals – the ones they are going to care for practically day and night for the next few months.

"Getting new animals each year is way better than Christmas morning," Caitlyn said.

Seward said that 4-H will continue to be an important part of the community because it gives children the chance to be part of a project they can call their own.

She encourages parents who have an interest in 4-H to contact Linda Edgington at the University of California Extension Center, 463-4495.

"I really feel the 4-H projects are an integral part of the fair, and I couldn't imagine having a fair without 4-H," Seward said.