



4-H outreach offers support to Hispanic families and youth

Some city folk may still hold to the notion that 4-H is about middle class white farm kids showing prize cows and giant vegetables at county fairs. A glimpse of 4-H, Southern Idaho style, would be eye opening.

Each year the people of 4-H and the enrichment programs they offer touch the lives of hundreds of Hispanic youth in the region. By way of translated print materials, group lessons, and one-to-one interaction, 4-H educators are helping Spanish speaking populations assimilate American culture.

One such teacher is Aleida Saiz, who works part-time in conjunction with the University of Idaho Extension Nutrition Program (ENP) to reach Hispanic families in the Pocatello area. She knows that to fulfill her primary mission, nutrition education, she must be aware that eating habits are developed in the context of culture and experience.

"I have to consider the big picture," Saiz says. "People can't learn about healthy eating if they don't know about smart shopping, meal planning, and safe food handling." These imperatives translate into a comprehensive approach that includes lessons in comparison-shopping, how to read nutrition labeling, safe storage, and correct preparation of food.

"I did a home visit with one client," Saiz recalls, "and she told me she had some ground beef to cook for dinner. When she showed it to me, it didn't look right. It turned out she had bought it almost two days before and never put it in the refrigerator."

The anecdote illustrates the challenges faced by Hispanics, many of whom immigrated from poverty stricken rural



Photo by Gwen Kress
Aleida Saiz brings nutrition education to 4-H children in schools, libraries, and other venues—including home visits.

areas of Mexico, Guatemala, and Central America, according to Saiz. Many may not "know about things like refrigerators, indoor cooking, how to prepare food they have never seen, and so on."

The "big picture" approach means ENP is more than a nutrition program. It also encompasses resource management such as planning meals, budgeting income, and even home buying. Of the more than 100 families Saiz has worked with, about half now own their homes, thanks to help with saving for down payments and contacting mortgage lenders.

Saiz's attitude about outreach and teaching is one of "do whatever it takes." She participates in organized after-school, before-school, and weekend ENP classes, traditionally held in libraries, daycares, and public school buildings. To better address the needs of her target audience, Saiz also conducts numerous home visits, meeting with parents during the day and with families in the evening.

The ENP curriculum has been an effective way to connect Hispanics with 4-H culture. Besides the standard lesson plans,

educators have used special projects and events to boost interest and participation. A project called "Exploring Our Food Heritage" provides opportunities for 4-H kids to exchange information and cooking skills from a variety of cultures in North America and beyond. "Food and Fun Olympics" covers all the basic concepts of nutrition, food safety, and personal hygiene in a four-week program.

After one or two years in basic ENP, Hispanic youth typically move on to traditional 4-H, including, yes, prepping livestock for show. "It offers a no-cost alternative to organized groups like Little League, Scouts, and school clubs, all of which cost money," says Audrey Liddil who is State Coordinator for Idaho's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. "4-H provides leaders, materials, posters, food and cooking lessons. And its outreach efforts are important because these kids are less likely to join those other groups."

The results of Extension 4-H's outreach to Idaho communities are measurably significant. In 2002, 4-H membership increased by over one-fourth, and enrollment of Hispanic children grew two-fold over 2001, rising from eight to 14 percent of total membership. Mentoring of newly enrolled kids by more seasoned 4-H youth is showing strong development, especially among teenage girls from Hispanic families.

4-H is a significant contributor to the greater goal of "helping youth develop into productive people," according to Liddil. "School teachers say it helps. They are seeing improvements in cooperativeness, team-player attitudes, and other life skills."