



## 4-H lights up and enlightens Idahoans in urban counties

Thomas Caldwell had built and launched a “mosquito” rocket at the Ada County Extension Office’s “Aerospace Exploration 4-H Day Camp” in 2001, and he returned in 2002 to do it again. “It’s pretty awesome,” said the 13-year-old Boisean. “You can’t launch rockets in the park and they’re too expensive to buy, but you can come here for cheap and spend the whole day.”

Joe Eckroat, a Middleton 11-year-old, agreed. “You don’t get to do this very often—to have someone who’s done something for a long time do it with you.”

Volunteer instructor Brian Luckey has been making model rockets since he was a 4-H’er himself. “It’s great for kids,” he said. “They’re learning something new through something fun—and they’re learning to think in ways that they don’t learn in school.”

Barbara Abo, a University of Idaho Extension 4-H educator in Ada County, credits special-topics day camps—along with a wealth of after-school programs and in-school projects like conflict-resolution—with reheating 4-H enrollment in Idaho’s urban areas. Today, about one in nine of Idaho’s nearly 33,000 4-H’ers lives in Ada or Canyon County.

Thanks to a spring 2001 mass-media recruitment campaign in the Treasure Valley, adult volunteer numbers are rebounding. Abo said 60-70 new 4-H leaders signed on in 2001-02, compared with an expected 10-20. They teach projects like sports fishing, geology, dog obedience, woodworking, fiber arts, small engines and Junior Master Gardeners.

Kevin Laughlin, another Ada County Extension educator, said 4-H’s “bright, shining star” is its emphasis on doing. “The kids do build rockets. They do raise a guinea pig. They do work in the garden, even if it’s only a container garden on the deck.” And that “do-think-learn” process depends on caring, nurturing adult mentors.

In summer 2002, 16 4-H’ers who were enrolled in a pilot “Going Places, Making Choices” project studied urban development and transportation issues right alongside city planners and builders, surveyed Boiseans on their transportation habits and delivered their own PowerPoint presentation to Boise city officials.

In Canyon County, Extension educator Joey Peutz agreed that 4-H’s enthusiastic, child-centered leaders—along with its diversity of activities—are the program’s fundamental strengths. To meet the changing needs of those adult leaders, many volunteer commitments are now short-term. To meet the changing needs of today’s kids, projects are evolving as well—from clothing construction, for example, to clothing coordination and embellishment. Scheduling is also evolving: in Notus, an afternoon “4-H Summer Camp” brings experientially based learning to 75 summer-school students, but only for one intensive month.

Mary and Robert Barros-Bailey of Hidden Springs were drawn to 4-H volunteer leadership primarily by the variety of interests their children could explore. But they were also looking for a program “to get involved with as a family—not a



Photo by Susanna Smith

4-Hers enjoy rocket launching in Ada County.

girls’ program or a boys’ program but a family program.”

Judith McShane, a Canyon County 4-H leader and home-schooling mom, says her teens’ 4-H projects give them a well-earned break from their intensively academic at-home curriculum. “They can choose something they’re interested in, research it and do it on their own,” she says.

While her club members are up to their hips in sports fishing, McShane’s children are exploring such other 4-H interests as geology, entomology and shooting sports. “Every year they build on what they’ve learned,” she says.

Says Laughlin of 4-H’ers: “They don’t do Blue Ribbon work all the time, but they’re all Blue Ribbon kids.”

