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Children feed and pet horses at 4-H's horse club meeting. Photo by Liz Wright

 Liz Wright

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Lifestyle

Saturday morning, at Spirit Creek Farm in Hephzibah, children of all ages were invited to fish and learn about horses with 4-H leaders of Richmond County.

Richmond County's 4-H is provided as a cooperative extension by the University of Georgia, and is a youth development program dedicated to educating students across the nation.



*Children enjoy fish, dogs, and horses at 4-H meeting. Photo by Liz Wright*

To kick off their first meeting this year, outside of the classroom, 4-H participants were able to experience hands-on learning with the guidance of parents and volunteers.

At 8 a.m., Sept. 17, participants gathered around a small pond and caught bream fish to their heart's content. While some choose to only do catch and release, others choose to bring fish home and learn how to clean and cook them.



*4-H participants fish for bream in the morning. Photo by Liz Wright*



Photo by Liz Wright

Later that morning, other attendees got to learn about horses, and for some participants this was their first time meeting one.

Shameka Mapp, Richmond County 4-H extension agent, said 4-H is “a place for everyone,” and believes horse club teaches children the responsibility of taking care of an animal.

As the meeting began, parents looked on with smiling faces, as children learned how to properly groom, feed and respectfully treat a horse.

“I think it’s important for them to learn about animals,” said Korie Black, mother of three 4-H participants. “I think it’s really beneficial for them, just in general, to learn a different perspective from what I can teach them.”





Parent teaches his daughter how to cast her line. Photo by Liz Wright



Father and son learn get their fishing poles ready. Photo by Liz Wright

Black also mentioned how 4-H is especially important for her 10-year-old daughter who has a learning disability because it allows her to thrive in hands-on learning.

“For her, I definitely think that hands-on learning stuff is better,” she said. “She loves anything that has anything to do with animals, so this is extremely beneficial for her; it gives her something to look forward to, and she was actually voted to be the recorder for her class. It really gives her something to look forward to.”

As a mother, Black said she was, at first, extremely apprehensive and worried about her daughter being elected to a 4-H position, due to her learning disability, but afterwards decided to take a

different approach to it.

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“When she first told me she was the recorder, my immediate first reaction was, ‘Oh my god, what does that mean? Oh my god,’ and then I thought ‘No, I’m not gonna tell my daughter she can’t mentally or physically do this. She’s gonna do the best she can, and we’ll work it out,’” she said. “So, I’m really proud and excited for her.”

Black’s daughter, Hannah, said her favorite part of the day was petting and feeding the horses. She also said she really looks forward to one day, possibly, riding a horse in the future.



*Hannah Black pets a horse at 4-H meeting. Photo by Liz Wright*

Morgan, who grew up in 4-H and now volunteers, said, “4-H gives kids a lot of good experiences, a lot of learning opportunities, a lot of useful skills they’re gonna need in the future like public speaking and research skills.”

Morgan said she loved the community that is 4-H and helping kids learn about different animals like horses.



“It helps them learn how to pursue their passion; you know, not everything that is useful can be learned in a classroom. It gives them the opportunity to pursue their interests and passions in a way that’s meaningful to them.



Children feed and pet horses at 4-H's horse club meeting. Photo by Liz Wright



Children write suggestions for future 4-H meetings. Photo by Liz Wright

4-H program assistant, Sandi Hockenberry, said she became a part of the program because of her two daughters who were both in the program as children.

Hockenberry said both daughters received valuable life lessons, and one of them even became a master 4-Her in companion animal science – a title awarded to those who place first in a competitive, state level event.

“It helped her with speaking and helps her with her job now at EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) where she teaches classes and everything; 4-H helped her, she was

a team leader with their camp, she is a leader because of 4-H,” said Hockenberry.



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Another fellow program assistant, Winnie Garrett, said she loves connecting with people and the children, and believes in the community the program offers. As a self-titled “lifelong learner,” Garrett also feels as though the children keep her “young,” and workers and volunteers learn something everyday from participating kids.

“What 4-H does for the kids is, for those that aren't very good at athletics or academics, gives them a place where they can shine,” she said. “They can take something that they're passionate about and they can talk about it, and what we do is refine that talk so they can go to competitions with us. They shine in 4-H and it really gives them a purpose.”



Children feed and pet a donkey at 4-H's horse club meeting. Photo by Liz Wright



Children feed and pet horses at 4-H's horse club meeting. Photo by Liz Wright

With a background in education at local elementary schools, owner of Spirit Creek Farm, Paula Kaminski Wilkins, hosts 4-H's horse and fishing club because she also believes in the program and wants to positively impact those in her community.

"I just believe in giving back to the community, and it sounds so hokey, but it really is something that, being an educator, you always want to do that," she said. "You want to give back and you've got stuff that people want here, you know, so why not share it and you don't know where it's gonna go when you share. You just never stop educating when you love it. You just feel in your soul that you want to share and just make the world a better place."



As an “ingrained” educator, Wilkins believes education needs to have a mix of in-classroom and hands-on learning, which 4-H helps accomplish.

“You have to have serious parts and then you have to have the fun parts. That combination of not just sitting down in a classroom learning, glazed look in your eyes, but also learning about hoof picks and then playing musical chairs,” she said. “That’s where you’re integrating your whole body, it’s so much more powerful as a learning tool than just sitting there. When you’re young, you’ve got to be able to get up, move, and experience your whole body. It makes your learning more powerful, more meaningful and more lasting.”



*Owner of Spirit Creek Farm, Paula Kaminski Wilkins, teaches children about a miniature horse (blue shirt). Photo by Liz Wright*

Like the attending children, Wilkins looks forward to the next 4-H horse and fishing club meeting next month towards the end of October.

“By and large, you just felt like you’re making kids feel good about learning and being a part of the community; being a part, in a good way, of making their world a better place,” she said. “Some of them we’re lighting up, but even the ones who don’t express it a lot – they still got something out of it. You know it didn’t fall on deaf ears, none of that. Even if you didn’t hear well, you still saw.”

As a hands-on learner herself, Mapp said, “You get to do these things that you’re learning, so it’s very practical. It’s not like you’re learning something now to be used so far off in the future, what you learn in 4-H is very applicable at the very moment, at that very time. Since I’ve been here the last few months, I’ve seen 4-H turn kids’ life around.”

Mapp said 4-H makes children feel like they “belong to something,” and allows them to meet kids from all over Richmond County while encouraging leadership roles.



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“Some of them know more than I do – so it’s amazing. The opportunities for the children are endless in 4-H, and I really, truly, believe that,” said Garrett. “They find friends too. They find life-long friends ... everybody belongs, no one is being ridiculed. They’re all really kind kids. It’s an amazing thing to see and witness; I’ve watched it over the years and it’s always the same.”



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To become a much needed 4-H volunteer or to sign-up your child for the program visit:

<https://extension.uga.edu/county-offices/richmond/4-h-youth-development.html>



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