

# LEARN



# BY DOING

## Alaska 4-H prepares students for real life

By Debbie Carter

When **Owen Ala** raised pigs, sheep and steers with his Kenai Peninsula 4-H group and butchered his first animal in fourth grade, he never realized how handy that experience would become in medical school.



Photos courtesy of Owen Ala

Ala, 29, began a five-year residency in orthopedic surgery at an Albuquerque, N.M., hospital in summer 2008. He is one of a group of distinguished Alaska 4-H alumni who have gone on to succeed in college and in a variety of careers.

The 4-H program, part of UAF's Cooperative Extension Service, emphasizes a hands-on approach to learning life skills, citizenship and leadership. A handful of 4-H agents across the state run the program with the help of more than 1,100 youth and adult volunteers.

Local 4-H clubs emphasize learning about cooking, sewing, gardening, science and raising livestock, as well as government and a host of other topics. 4-H kids have also participated in a moose hunt, earned emergency medical certification and studied crime scene investigation. Club members themselves choose what to emphasize.

### Kids and parents learning together

Nancy Veal grew up with 4-H in eastern Oregon, and she became a market livestock leader on the Kenai Peninsula when her own kids were of 4-H age. She volunteered for 20 years and has led 4-H programming on the Kenai the past eight years.

Veal has seen Ala and others grow up and become teachers, business owners, farmers, veterinarians and doctors. Some former 4-H'ers, like herself, have become 4-H leaders.

The program continues to be successful, she believes, because kids and parents are involved and learning at the same time. The kids work with guidelines, project books and deadlines. Those who raise livestock are accountable for an animal's welfare.

Dr. Ala, who graduated from Cornell University medical school in May, says the skills required for dissecting a cadaver or performing surgery are very similar to the skills required for butchering a pig or steer. Through 4-H, he learned the basics of anatomy.

"I kind of had a leg up," he said.

His 4-H public speaking experiences also help him present research to large audiences and patient case histories to doctors.

"You become more responsible," she said.

Since 4-H kids care for their animals, they also learn a lot of veterinary medicine. Ala learned how to give shots, dehorn and castrate animals, and dress wounds. Caring for animals and making multiple visits to doctors for his own health issues, including broken bones, encouraged his interest in medicine.

Last fall, as he has done on several visits home, Ala butchered a pig with a group of 4-H'ers, taking time to talk to them about bones, muscles and organs.

The main philosophy Ala learned from 4-H is that you just jump in and learn. That approach helped in medical school, he said. "I was much more comfortable getting in and doing things because I've been doing it my whole life."



Childhood photo courtesy of Chelsey Schell Kuester

### "You can do it!"

**Chelsey Schell Kuester**, who spoke to a 4-H youth leadership forum on the UAF campus earlier this year, said 10 years of 4-H gave her the confidence to try new things and the message, "You can do it!"

"It's that simple seed that they planted," she said. "It's a huge confidence builder."

Kuester, 26, started participating in 4-H at age 5 when an older sister joined a sewing class. The leader encouraged her to sew also, and she made a doll, then doll clothes, and her own clothing by the time she was 7.

Growing up in Michigan, her 4-H experiences revolved around arts and crafts projects, including sewing, macramé and glass etching — skills that leaders and parents contributed. During the summers, she canoed on rivers at 4-H camp, despite being nearly blind in one eye (and not being allowed to wear glasses while in a boat) and practiced shooting sports.

After graduating from college, Kuester became a television journalist in Fairbanks, where she reported on a variety of 4-H camps and activities that rekindled her interest in the program. This past January, she stepped into new territory by becoming the community development director for the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, which promotes the downtown area.

### A family affair

The screen saver on **Matt Bray's** computer features several domesticated goats clambering over rocks. Bray, who is finishing a doctorate in permafrost engineering at UAF, cannot remember life without goats — or without 4-H.

His mother, Annette, is a longtime leader and his sister, Maria, has served as a leader for a 4-H club north of Fairbanks for seven years. The family's current herd of goats numbers about 30, and they have provided scores of the animals for 4-H youth and others who want to raise the Toggenburg and Saanen dairy breeds. Matt, 31, is the primary caregiver for the herd, but both Bray siblings provide showmanship clinics every year to 4-H'ers who want to learn about grooming goats and showing them at the fair. The family also serves as an unofficial source of goat-care information for goat owners.

Since Bray grew up around 4-H and raised animals, joining 4-H when he was 8 seemed like a natural progression. Every summer for about 10 years, he took care of pigs, calves and goat kids at the Tanana Valley State Fair. Keeping livestock at the fair meant that he practically lived there for the week to care for them.

"You take them to the auction and hope you get a good price," he said.

Most of what he learned about raising animals came from his family but 4-H provided an opportunity to get together with kids with similar interests.



Childhood photo courtesy of Matt Bray

UAF alumni featured in this story: Matt Bray, '01, '03; Maria Bray, '98



Unlike a typical 4-H livestock project, which involved raising animals for the fair, the Brays tended a year-round goat herd and handled most of the animal care themselves.

Matt continues to enjoy raising goats and the satisfactions that come with it, he said, such as assisting with a trouble-free birth of twin goat kids and the ability to produce milk from a healthy, known source.

"I work with goats for the little things — the small moments when they bring a smile to your face," he said. "The greetings of a bunch of goat kids in the morning when you bring them their bottles of milk and you know they think you are the best person in the world. When the goats feel frisky and run and play and jump ... looking out and seeing a bunch of goats relaxing in the morning sun, chewing their cud with a look of complete contentment."

### Learning leadership

**Rocki Hanscom**, a senior majoring in political science at UAF, said her 4-H experiences, which emphasized citizenship and government, helped shape her career interests. She is considering a career in foreign service or in international law.

Hanscom, 21, got her 4-H start as a Cloverbud, working in her mom's community garden behind Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks. She entered produce and flowers in competitions at the Tanana Valley State Fair. During second grade, she acquired a pet guinea pig, Nestlé, and learned how to show him at the fair. She started giving demonstrations in second grade as well, on topics such as how to transplant a plant. She also learned arts, cooking and sewing, and participated in the fair's bake-off and fashion review.

During eighth grade, Hanscom started working on a 4-H government project. She and other 4-H kids lobbied the Alaska Legislature on a livestock liability bill, which limited the liability of livestock owners who show animals in public places. Meeting with legislators, she said, "was a real educational experience."

The following summer, she participated in a 4-H exchange to Maine and in Citizenship Washington Focus, a citizenship program for 4-H teens in the nation's capital. She followed that up with a national 4-H leadership conference her freshman year of high school. She helped plan the event the following year and led a session for the conference.

Before her first semester at UAF, Hanscom became an intern for U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski and observed the dynamics of the senator's office up close. She returned to the senator's office in summer 2008 to coordinate the high school internship program.

4-H definitely improved her leadership and public speaking skills, and helped her pursue her interests in college, Hanscom said.

"A lot of people think that 4-H is animals and gardening and cooking and sewing but it's just so much more than that," she said.



Childhood photo courtesy of Cooperative Extension Service

"It's helped me get to the next level, to get an internship."

In Alaska, some 10,000 kids participate in 4-H sponsored events, whether it's after-school clubs, special-interest classes or more traditional 4-H activities. They all fulfill the 4-H philosophy: learn by doing.



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See 4-H kids in action at the 2008 Tanana Valley State Fair at [www.uaf.edu/aurora/](http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/).

### The history of 4-H

4-H has rural roots. Its philosophy of practical, hands-on learning grew more than 100 years ago out of a desire to make public school education more connected to country life.

When Congress created the Cooperative Extension Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1914, it included boys' and girls' club work. Soon after, the youth organization became known as 4-H and its logo became a four-leaf clover with 4 Hs, standing for head, heart, hands and health. Today, 4-H is coordinated by Extension agents working with land-grant universities throughout the United States. 4-H clubs and related organizations now exist in other countries, too.

In most states, you can join 4-H if you are between the ages of 8 and 18. The 4-H program includes more than seven million members nationally. Most programs center around three areas: leadership, citizenship and life skills. The 4-H motto is "to make the best better."