



By: Adam Cletzer, 4-H Agent

Early last Saturday morning, 11-year-old Danielle Meeks breathed a sigh of relief as the scale's digital readout stopped its ascent at a lean 241 pounds.

"Miss Brooke," her 4-H project pig, was shooed from the scales and Danielle seemed pleased she was on track to weigh in just under the maximum weight at this month's Firefighters' Fair.

For Danielle and nearly 90 other youth involved in a 4-H animal science project, entering the show ring at the fair is not just a single night's competition, but the culmination of months of hard work with her animal and with her 4-H club.

"4-H animal science projects are good all-around learning experiences," said Sam Adams, 4-H volunteer and Rules Committee Chair of Youth Livestock Association, the group that puts on the show and sale. "The kids are getting real world experience and practical application of what they learn in school. And it's a family activity."

Though the public typically only sees 4-H each year at the county fair, all 4-H members begin their year in mid-August when the clubs reconvene after the summer break. Throughout the year, each member must participate in community service activities, complete their project animal's record book, give speeches, organize club meetings and clinics, and any other special events.

"One of the biggest misconceptions is that 4-H only exists during the fair," said Christine Kelly-Begazo, director of the county's University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service, the parent organization of 4-H. "In reality those kids are

For immediate release

working together all year long. They have a lot of fun, but they're also learning a tremendous amount from their club leaders, and from each other."

Danielle belongs to the Swinemasters 4-H Club, a group of 20 youth that meets biweekly in a local elementary school's cafeteria. After three years in the club, her peers elected her club treasurer for the 2007-2008 4-H year.

At only 11 years old, part of her responsibilities include keeping records of the club's annual fundraiser, the first-of-its-kind Swinemaster's Swine Prospect Show, which was held last December.

"These kids are really learning how to work with one another," said Gena Comes, one of the club's adult volunteer leaders. "They're learning individual responsibility with their animal, but they're also learning how to be part of a team. We love to see them go from being quiet and shy to outgoing and confident members of the group."

Danielle's experience is typical of other youth involved in 4-H in Indian River and across the country — even the heart-stopping weigh-in moment.

Indian River County 4-H has 10 animal project clubs that will be represented at the 2008 Firefighter's Fair.

4-H is the youth development program of the United States Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with the University of Florida's IFAS Extension Service.

For more information about 4-H, contact the Indian River County Extension office at (772) 770-5030.