

## Important Lessons Learned from a Volunteer Leader

One evening while helping 4-H'ers during a record book workshop, a thought flashed in my mind: what if adult leaders did a record book? What if we recorded our successes and failures just like the kids? What if we shared all the good things we've done?

Of course, suggesting the leaders do even one more piece of paperwork at the end of the year would get me lynched. Instead, I thought I'd just try it myself and maybe inspire someone. So here is my story...

### One 4-H leader's Story

I'm a middle-aged full time working mom whose had kids in 4-H for seven years. I've been a leader for six. It took me three years just to figure it all out. I guess you could call me a slow learner.

My parents are both college graduates. My father was in the aerospace industry. My mother was a homemaker who taught me how to cook, sew, embroider, knit and crochet. They were both perfectionists, and I grew up being one too, like my brothers. If I had been in 4-H, I probably wouldn't have been happy with anything but blue ribbons. Quality and self-discipline were the most important things. I didn't learn a lot about tolerance or compassion and helping others.

I got into 4-H because my husband grew up in it, and his experience led to what he does for a living now. I think he turned out pretty well, and I wanted out kids to be like him. So I enrolled them in 4-H. I had great expectations. I figured the leaders had lots of experience and were experts of some kind.

Then I was asked to be a project leader. Being a helpful sort, I said yes, since it was a subject I knew something about. Well, after my first dismal year, I learned 3 important things. First, *I realized I knew nothing about 12 and 13 year olds.* I was dead wrong in expecting that they'd sit still, pay attention, and focus on their work. Second, *I should have had them make something useful, however small.* Third, *as new project leaders, we aren't necessarily guided into everything we really need to know. "Learn by doing" wasn't just for the kids; it was for me too!*

After doing the project for two more years, I finally felt satisfied that my project kids had learned something new and useful. I got over the feeling that I'd been thrown to the wolves. I figured I'd earned a star for my hat, too. During those first few years, I got familiar with other 4-H activities. Like County Presentation Day (which our club hosted one year), what the County Council does, what goes on at the fair, what a field day is for, what makes a good record book. I learned that making things happen is not as simple as having a really good idea. Most importantly, I learned that "they" don't make it happen or have the answers. "They" is me.

So I decided that if I was going to be critical of how others were doing things (and boy, could I be critical!), I had to be willing to do the work. I volunteered to be a community club leader. If not got the help of an assistant leader who was really good at paperwork, I would have drowned in it. I hated paperwork and deadlines. I realized the true value of good organization skills. I worked too hard all the time and realized that no matter what I did somebody wasn't going to be happy with me.

I became, maybe too late, very forgiving of former leaders who hadn't lived up to my expectations. Especially since my expectations were now a lot more honest.

If I had to list any accomplishments as a community leader, I like to think I did a good job educating new parents and leaders about the 4-H program and how they could help. I broke down big jobs into

many little jobs that even the busiest, shyest, or least confident parent was willing to do. I became involved in County Council.

***I learned that the best response to negative people is “What can you offer to make it better?”***

There are other good things I’ve learned by being involved with 4-H:

1. 4-H began as a sneaky way to get new information into adults who are set in their ways, *since we have to learn something ourselves before we can teach it to our kids* (sometimes the night before...)
2. There are two kinds of “best”: the standard by experts and *the best we accomplish compared to what we did before*.
3. It’s easier to live by your principles if they don’t have names and faces.
4. “Learn by doing” means doing unsuccessful things as well as doing it right.
5. It isn’t for me to judge how much a family is putting into or getting out of 4-H.
6. *Intelligent doesn’t mean wise*.
7. *Paperwork has to be done, on time*. But if the heart isn’t in it, details lose their meaning.

Now a new 4-H year is starting and I’m looking forward to a fresh start and sharing my experience for the benefit of my club and kids. I’ve set a new goal for myself, *to focus on helping the kids reach their goals, and not take on so much that I’m exhausted and cranky*. Most of all, **I want to put the fun back in 4-H.**

-Anonymous