

4-H and the ARBA

....or what can be an amazing alliance

Have you read Roger Hassenpflug's District 1 report in the Domestic Rabbit (bi-monthly publication of the ARBA)? He talks about membership of the ARBA and some interesting statistics. He ended his report with "To be continued. Maybe." It prompted me to think about what makes an organization grow, and grow strong. One factor is a youth program. I want to share with you what works for us in the Rada Rabbit and Cavies 4-H Youth Club. We have a rabbit and cavy 4-H club that combines principles and resources from 4-H with the structure and publications of the ARBA. Parent leaders and youth alike find it amazingly rewarding!!!

The principles of 4-H are about developing belonging, mastery, generosity and independence. (Pat Boyes, Director of WA State 4-H). Part of the object of the ARBA is to promote, encourage and develop the rabbit and cavy industry and fancy. These include maintaining the Breed Standards and furnish, at minimum cost, bulletins, standards, posters, booklets, textbooks etc. to its members (2007-2008 ARBA Yearbook).

Allow me to use our upcoming event, our 15th Annual "April Seminar & Shows", as a case in point of how we manage to combine the benefits of both organizations.

We are foremost a 4-H club. The bigger picture of learning citizenship, leadership and life skills are of primary importance. The rabbit and cavy hobby is the vehicle. What do we do at our April Seminar? Throughout the day there are speakers on rabbit and cavy related topics, a rabbit and cavy bowl, a WSRBA Royalty promotion booth, a "Funny Bunny & Cavy" contest, poster contest, huge raffle, silent auction of show quality animals, and more. Additionally, we have over 300 rabbits in the ARBA sanctioned youth show, around 40 cavies in an ACBA sanctioned cavy youth show. Over 100 youth participate in 4-H rabbit and cavy showmanship workshops in the morning, followed by a showmanship contest in the afternoon. Concessions are served throughout the day. Let's look at how the principles apply:

Belonging: Our club has been around for 15 years. It has developed traditions, and one of them is to organize the April Seminar every year. This promotes a sense of belonging for the youth who help plan. There are many events "we always do" and out of that experience develop new ones. They are a part of something that is bigger than them.

Mastery: The workshops in the morning are all about mastery. How do you handle an animal safely, and do a health check for instance? Where do you find out what this breed is all about? A 6 year old who finally learns how to check a cavies' teeth, will experience a sense of mastery!

Generosity: We make sure that the event has a definite service aspect. Admission to the event is free. All workshops, seminars, participation in rabbit and cavy bowl, "Funny Bunny & Cavy" contest, are free to anyone in the community that wants to learn. Youth also learn about generosity of the community merchants, who donate goods towards the raffle and for prizes, awards etc.

Independence: Last year I asked a timid 15 year old to present the cavy showmanship workshop. She was very hesitant, even though I knew she had the knowledge and skills to do this. After coaching and encouragement she did and did well, and when I asked her to present again this year, she said "Oh yeah, I would love to!" She said it with confidence, and did not need any more input. Through this leadership opportunity, she was able to gain confidence and independence.

Where does the ARBA come in? Their publications add tremendously to the resources for the rabbit and cavy hobby. The ARBA's "Standard of Perfection" is recognized nationwide within the 4-H rabbit and cavy community as the authority on breed standards. Our club has ARBA sanctioned youth rabbit and cavy shows, judged by ARBA judges, and an ARBA Registrar on site. The ARBA district educational fund has offered scholarships for some educational materials that we can give out to youth just starting out. The ARBA has an annual set of educational contests (breed identification, judging contests) at the annual National Convention that are a huge attraction. Their Royalty Contest is an enormous challenge that promotes studying, learning together and a whole new set of skills. The application helps them define goals within their project, and forces them to look back at achievements.

We have around 40 youth members in our club, that all raise either rabbits or cavies or both. We go to local, regional, state and national events. Some of the learning is in competitive settings, but most is in life skills such as presenting public presentations at Fair, managing your budget, practicing patience and respect at community service projects like our pet therapy project that takes us to a nursing home. One of our club members is an ARBA Rabbit Registrar, and a retired club member (now in college) is an ARBA Rabbit and Cavy Registrar. Members of our club have won many State Royalty and 5 National Royalty titles in the last 7 years.

How did all this come to be? To make a difference "out there" you must start at home, locally! In our club, developing belonging, mastery, generosity and independence are of primary importance. This develops in both youth and parents. We have around 40 youth, who plan, preside, speak up and facilitate monthly general membership meetings. At our bi-annual parent meetings we typically have an attendance of about 20. Parent involvement is crucial. At State Fair last year, we had 21 youth, and 9 parents. In other words, the parent-youth ratio at events is often close to 1:2.

In closing, as a leader, I have to have fun and like to be inspired. So, fun we have!! Ever tried sleeping 8 youth and 3 adults in one La Quinta room with 2 queen beds, and then get up at 6 AM, enjoy breakfast in order to be in good time for the rabbit show? To me, that is amazingly fun!! For inspiration, I watch a shy youth belong, a new youth master, and an experienced youth be generous and independent. To me, that is wonderfully inspiring.

To be continued? You bet!

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