

Welcome Los Amigos 4-H Club ~ WVU News



Berkeley County 4-H recently launched a new Hispanic 4-H club - the first in the state - to answer the needs of the growing Hispanic population in eastern West Virginia.

The state's overall Hispanic population increased by nearly 18 percent between 2000 and 2004 with 45 out of the 55 counties in the state seeing an increase in Hispanics in their communities, according to the WVU Bureau for Business and Economic Research.

Richard L Fleisher, WVU Extension Specialist and Associate Professor, said the Hispanic 4-H club

is one of several ways that Extension is responding to the challenges presented by this population diversification.

"In Berkeley County, 4-H is already serving as a catalyst for bringing young people, their parents and 4-H volunteers together from the Hispanic club and traditional clubs to work together and learn together," said Fleisher.

"The organization is a link to help the dominant culture learn about the Hispanic culture and help the Hispanic culture increase their understanding of West Virginia culture and their comfort level with becoming an integrated part of the community. Our work in 4-H complements and reinforces similar efforts in the school system and in the community. It has served as a successful bridge across cultures in numerous states with significant Hispanic populations, such as Texas, California and Arizona."

Fleisher represents the Extension Service as a member of the Eastern Panhandle Hispanic Advocacy Coalition (EPHAC) and teaches a WVU Extended Learning graduate class for educators in the Eastern region called "Engaging the Hispanic students in your classroom."

He said because of his work with 4-H and interaction in these two networks, he recognized the potential value of creating this club.

Doug Hovatter, the WVU Extension 4-H Agent in Berkeley County, agreed that 4-H can help integrate the community. "There is a Hispanic community within our community. We realized the need to reach out with 4-H youth development within the Hispanic community," said Hovatter, adding that the club is open to any youth ages 9 through 21 regardless of their cultural background. "I see nothing but wonderful, wonderful things coming from this exchange of cultures."

The first Hispanic 4-H club met Jan. 26 in Berkeley County. Hovatter said 28 children attended with their parents and voted to name the group the Los Amigos 4-H Club.

"There are 80 families showing interest in this club, which would put the size to perhaps more than 200, making more Hispanic clubs in the future a definite possibility," said Hovatter.

The idea for the club began last fall, but completing the paperwork and getting a volunteer sponsor, St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church of Martinsburg, W.Va., were the first steps.

Hovatter said the club will function as a normal 4-H club but will explore and incorporate the Hispanic heritage and culture. "Part of it will be sharing their foods, music and culture when we have other clubs visiting them," said Hovatter, adding that pledges and other recitations will be done in Spanish.

He added that both Spanish and English will be spoken at meetings. "We want the kids to have a safe environment to explore their culture and heritage in," Hovatter said, adding that most of the children already know English as a second language but some parents do not.

Typical 4-H projects include hands-on activities drawn from the visual arts, performing arts, textile arts, celebrations, global education, service learning and health education, to name a few. "The young people themselves select their own activities and projects," Fleisher added. "We provide them options and lessons learned from our resource materials and experiences with other clubs."

Hovatter said he was pleasantly surprised by the response of adult volunteers wanting to work with the club. "Sometimes getting adults to volunteer is difficult because of their busy schedules," said Hovatter. "We had seven individuals step up to the plate and volunteer to be leaders. Most of the time, you just get one."

Several older 4-H members made presentations at the first meeting to demonstrate the different types of 4-H projects available. "A beautiful thing has been the opportunity to see older 4-H members in Berkeley County come to the meeting and talk to the kids about what it means to be in 4-H," said Hovatter. "You could just see the awe as they sat with their eyes and mouths opened wide."

Fleisher said they hope to organize a summer 4-H camp in the Eastern part of the state with a focus on Hispanic cultures and heritage.

