Fairbanks 4-H leader wins national award

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As a 4-H leader, Priscilla Rice has coordinated a drive to send hundreds of care packages to U.S. soldiers in Iraq, planted thousands of flowers, led livestock clinics and organized statewide 4-H gatherings.

But perhaps her most unusual 4-H experience involved sewing a hot pink tutu, swimwear and an evening gown for a chicken, who preened for the Tanana Valley State Fair’s poultry beauty pageant.

Rice, the leader of the Forget-Me-Not 4-H Club in Fairbanks, recently received one of two national awards given to 4-H leaders. She was named the 2009 National 4-H Salute to Excellence Volunteer of the Year. Rice was chosen from four regional winners for the award, which 4-H presents to one volunteer with less than 10 years of service.

Rice will be recognized Oct. 9 in the National 4-H Hall of Fame ceremony in Chevy Chase, Md. She also will receive a $1,000 award to donate to the 4-H program of her choice.

Marla Lowder, 4-H and Youth Development agent for the Tanana District, said she nominated Rice for the award because of her hard work and because “she makes things happen.” Rice was selected from 20,000 4-H leaders around the country.

Rice is thrilled with getting the award. “It’s still hard to believe,” she said. She credits the support of many 4-H youth, club leaders, parents, as well as state and local businesses alike with the success of her endeavors.

Rice has led the Forget-Me-Not 4-H Club for seven years and serves as president of the Tanana District 4-H Leaders Council. She has conducted several information sessions on livestock and animal husbandry for all the district youth and organized a livestock education day, arranging for veterinarians and other experts to talk to the youth on topics such as breeding, ear tagging, immunization and raising reindeer. She also served as the main organizer for the 4-H State Leaders Forum in 2008.

Her husband, Steve, a 4-H project leader for the club, confirms, “Priscilla breathes, eats and sleeps 4-H; her blood truly runs green.”

In 2008, she was named Tanana District’s 4-H Leader of the Year and her 13-year-old daughter, Michaella, was one of two teens named 4-H Member of the Year. The previous year, the Rices were named 4-H Family of the Year. Priscilla’s younger daughters, Lillianna, 10, and Kaitlynne, 7, also participate in the club.
During the year, the club works on seasonal projects, such as gardening and flowers. They got into flowers seriously in 2007 after Proven-Winners, a floral supplier, donated 1,300 flower plugs to the club. Risse Greenhouse provided guidance and donated the use of a greenhouse. The club transplanted the flower plugs and cared for them until they were replanted at the Pioneers Home, Denali Center, Tanana Valley State Fair and the Fairbanks Police Department.

Another focus of the club is livestock. Rice was introduced to raising livestock on the family farm in Delta Junction. She raised beef cattle and tried her hand at poultry, pheasant, and even an ornery pig, all through the FFA program. While attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she became the livestock superintendent at the Deltana Fair and cattle superintendent at the Tanana Valley State Fair. She has continued to be cattle superintendent for most of the last 15 years.

Depending on her children’s 4-H projects, the animal count at the Rices’ farm off Chena Hot Springs Road varies. Currently, it includes 10 cows, 13 pigs, a dozen goats, turkeys, chickens, rabbits, and one sheep.

Altogether she participated in FFA for more than 20 years — as a student and then volunteer. She became involved with 4-H so her young children could participate but is an enthusiastic proponent of both organizations.

One reason Rice likes 4-H so much is that it promotes hands-on experiences, leadership and travel. During the 4-H trip to Juneau this year, seven kids from around the state, including Michaella Rice, learned how the Legislature works. They studied the legislative process and listened in on committee meetings. Michaella testified on a bill that would have prohibited teenage drivers from using cell phones while driving.

“She thought the bill should be for all ages or no ages. Her argument was age discrimination,” said Rice.

They also dissected and challenged sections of HB70, an Alaska grown bill that would have allowed foods to be grown elsewhere and then processed in Alaska to be labeled Alaska Grown and then used in the school meal programs.

The 4-H program emphasizes practical, hands-on learning and is offered through land-grant universities around the country. The Alaska 4-H program is coordinated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service.

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