

Hog auction

Laughter, tears and lessons win ribbons at Pacific County Fair

Story and photos
By NATALIE ST. JOHN
EO Media Group

MENLO, Wash. — As the last few empty spaces in the bleachers filled in, Future Farmers of America adviser Molly Majors called a group of the county's youngest farmers together for some final words of advice.

As Majors explained the procedure for the livestock auction, her audience of about a dozen local kids, ages 10 to 19, seemed oblivious to the grunting hogs that were showing their faces deep into the wood shavings at their feet.

She joked with the nervous students, telling them, "Tears always help!"

Pigs for profit

For these young members of 4-H and Future Farmers of America, the evening livestock auction at the Pacific County Fair in South Bend was the culmination of months of hard work, and a test of whether their efforts to raise healthy, high-quality animals had paid off.

Each year, students in FFA purchase a calf, lamb, goat or piglet in the spring, usually for about \$100 to \$400. For the next several months, they provide shelter, food and daily exercise and care to the animals. As the late-summer auction nears, the students approach local businesses and community members, asking them to sponsor students, buy an animal at auction, or both.

On the big night, a crowd gathers and a professional auctioneer introduces each student and their animal, then pushes buyers to bid the highest price-per-pound possible.

For humans, the auction can be a great deal. The buyer gets to support a local cause, and fill the freezer with a year's supply of ethically raised, high-quality meat. The student gets seed-money for the next year's animals, and usually, a profit of anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500. But the better the auction goes, the worse it works out for the animal in question, who usually gets a one-way trip to the butcher.

Farming friends

Siblings Itzia, Leonel and Luis Ruelas and their good friend Madison Huber are all FFA members who are raising their pigs together on the Ruelas family farm in Menlo.

They know each other very well — in addition to being in FFA, high school senior Itzia, Madison and Leonel, who are both juniors, and eighth-grader Luis all attend Willapa Valley, play on the same sports teams, and go to church together, too.

Though Madison has raised livestock for years, the Ruelas kids are doing it for the first time this year. But by this July,

the daily routine of getting together to take care of the hogs had become second-nature.

Every day, they let the pigs out into the fenced-in sty for some exercise, and made sure their pen inside the old wooden barn had plenty of clean shavings. They fed and watered the pigs, and checked each one for any signs of illness or injury.

"You have to come out here every day, check their pen, check their feed, fix all the stuff they break!" Leonel said, explaining that a couple of the especially clever pigs had a gift for finding weak spots in the pen.

"Once they figure out a way to get out, they'll just keep doing that, over and over again."

Proponents of FFA and 4-H say that in addition to teaching students the basics of farming, the programs also teach students how to manage a budget and run a small business.

Madison agrees that her experience in the program has taught her about financial management and helped her develop an appreciation for the hard work that goes into producing a quality product.

Some people rely on automatic feeders and pretty much leave the pigs alone, Madison said, "but then they don't get the exercise and good meat that they need. They're fatty, not good-quality animals."

The Future Farmers quickly learn that there's no such thing as taking a day off in farming — the kids have to plan their schedule around the animals' needs, even during summer vacation. They also have to deal with the same kinds of pitfalls as adult farmers; unpredictable auction prices, unexpected vet bills and animals that just don't thrive.

This year, some of the pigs came down with a stress-induced condition known as "dippity-pig" that temporarily made them lose control of their hind legs. The kids had to figure out what had caused the pigs to become stressed and provide daily care to nurse their animals back to health. With some medication and minor adjustments to their living arrangements and feeding routines, the pigs made a quick recovery, but the kids might not have caught the problem in time if they'd been less attentive.

When asked if they ever feel guilty about raising animals for meat, the kids reasonably pointed out that FFA livestock have far better lives than most animals that are raised for meat. Most pigs spend their brief lives crammed cheek-by-jowl in enormous industrial feeding operations, where they are overfed and pumped full of medications to counter the

Pigs aren't pets

Given the level of responsibility the program requires, and the inevitable outcome, there's no denying that participation almost always involves a few serious life-lessons.

Pigs are sensitive, intelligent



Itzia Ruelas, center, helped to move pigs to the auction arena Friday night at the Pacific County Fair in South Bend, Wash.



Itzia Ruelas scratched her Yorkshire pig, "The Rock" on her family's farm in July.

animals, and Madison Huber and the Ruelas kids acknowledge that it takes a bit of effort not to get a little attached after spending time with them daily and observing their unique personalities for months.

For a few years, Madison raised cows. But she found that it was hard to turn a profit and even harder to say goodbye to them. When their fate was sealed at auction, she says she ended up crying every year. This year, she decided to switch back to pigs. "Since the beginning, we kind of knew what they were going to be used for, so we kind of had to get used to that," Leonel explained.

"I liked mine more when they were little," Itzia added. At first, she would sit in the hay and play with them. But as they got older, they stopped letting her cuddle them and it got easier to keep a little emotional distance.

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effects of constant stress. The pigs on the Ruelas farms may meet a similar end, but in the meantime, they get space, exercise, stimulation and compassion.

Preauction jitters

Still, on auction night, the pigs seemed to pick up on the kids' nervous energy. For the first few days of the fair, the pigs peacefully grazed in individual pens, coming out only briefly Wednesday for the livestock show. But Friday evening, handlers shooed the pigs into a rolling chain-link pen, then ferried them across the fairgrounds to the pen behind the auctioneer's arena.

For an hour before the auction, the kids, in jeans, boots and cowboy shirts or monogrammed blue velvet FFA jackets chased the pigs around the auction pen, spraying off muck, brushing them down, misting them with skin conditioner.

The increasingly agitated pigs muscled through the crowd of kids and little pig-fights broke out. With help from a handful of adults, the young farmers calmly used



A sizable audience gathered at the auction arena. Most people who buy animals have them butchered, though some have been known to keep the animals or return them to the student.



Itzia Ruelas brushed her pig, "The Rock," in preparation for the Friday night livestock auction at the Pacific County Fair.

handled plywood boards and thin, colored plastic canes — known as "pig-show sticks" — to separate them.

Parting ways and getting paid

When their names came up, each Future Farmer led their animal into a small pen in the arena, and tried to smile as the auctioneer read their introductions from little cards. The students thanked their teachers and the local sponsors who had generously agreed to tack on a little extra to the sale price of each animal. One boy thanked his neighbors for supporting him on his daily walks around the neighborhood with his lamb. Virtually all of the Future Farmers pledged to save their profits for college.

Despite the fact that the majority of buyers have the animals butchered soon after purchase, most students couldn't resist throwing in a few personal details about the animal's personalities. One student said his pig loved to eat marshmallows. Another said his pig

loved pushing a bowling ball around, and being sprayed with the hose.

The auctions went fast — in five minutes at most, the auctioneer had used his signature combination of humor, lightning-fast talk and gentle prodding to talk the buyers into pledging anywhere from \$3 to \$5 per pound for each animal.

Afterward, Madison and the Ruelas kids returned to the pens, to spend just a few more minutes with the pigs. Luis had secured a price of \$3.50 per pound, Leonel and Madison each got \$3.75, and Itzia got \$4 per pound.

Itzia said she thought she'd done pretty well for a first-timer. After expenses, her 275-pound hog, "The Rock," will bring her a profit of about \$900.

Looking both sad and relieved, she glanced down at The Rock, who was rooting in the sawdust at her feet.

"Four dollars per pound is really a very good price," she said.

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We are excited to announce we are retiring and have sold our store to longtime employee Thea Dyal and her husband Rick Fried.

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Thank You again to all our customers for a great 11 years!

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Parents of incoming Kindergarten students are encouraged to register as soon as possible. We have important information to share with you about the first days of school.

Warrenton's HeadStart program is also accepting applications for children ages 3 and 4.

We are excited about this upcoming school year and look forward to working with you in the education of your child. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS PLEASE CONTACT US AT 503-861-3376

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