

Overcoming obstacles, gaining experiences, and preparing for life

Over the past 114 years, 4-H has continued to grow and expand across the country. The program reaches different populations incorporating youth and adults from all cultures and backgrounds. 4-H not only opens doors to promote better living but its projects affects the life of the participants. The program that opened the door for me as a 4-H youth was the 4-H Healthy Living Ambassador program that I participated in at my local high school. Now, as an employee, it continues to provide me once in a lifetime opportunities and educational lessons.

In Santa Cruz County, the 4-H Healthy Living Ambassadors program is growing exponentially. This program just celebrated its second anniversary in Santa Cruz County and the majority of the members are Latino. University of Arizona Cooperative Extension (UACE) Assistant 4-H agent Amanda Zamudio saw the program as an opportunity to expand programming into the border communities of Nogales and Rio Rico and collaborated with Rebecca Gil, science teacher, at Nogales High School. Mrs. Gil was the advisor of the Leos Club and they decided that an integration of the two clubs was a good fit. The organizations share the same values and want to teach youth about service learning, community service, and developing life skills. Amanda Zamudio and Vanessa Niebla, instructional specialist with UACE, have implemented the program and trained the youth to become 4-H Healthy Living Ambassadors. They are responsible for all components of the diverse program and utilize service from AmeriCorps members Maggie Gonzalez and Samantha Sanchez.

During the training, UACE staff teaches the youth participants numerous nutrition lessons and the importance of physical activity. After the training, youth ambassadors are then expected to teach these lessons to their peers and other audiences. Throughout the year, the Healthy Living Ambassadors share their knowledge and teach to a variety of audiences. As a reward for their hard work and dedication to the program, the youth get to participate in a teen summit with other counties in Arizona. The summit provides them the opportunity to hike the Grand Canyon and camp with others.

The Grand Canyon trip is an experience where all your emotions come into play. You have the chance to relax, enjoy nature and the company, push you out of your comfort zone, and push yourself physically and mentally farther and harder than you knew was possible. During the weekend you laugh, jump, yell, and have fun; at the same time you cry, suffer, and go beyond your own limitations. The trip from Nogales to the Grand Canyon is about seven hours and during the road trip youth have the chance to meet other ambassadors from different counties. Not only are these youth from different counties, they come from different backgrounds, cultures, and values it is a great time when youth share with one another and begin build friendships. Once we arrive at our camping site, the youth and adults quickly start working together to unpack the trailer and camp set up. This year everyone jumped in to help one another as the snow continued to fall and the temperature got cooler. Of course, there were some snowballs flying because it is a sight we do not often see especially in southern Arizona.

After camp is set up and dinner is served all participants huddle around a campfire to hear important instructions for the hike. UACE 4-H Agent Mike Hauser, an expert in hiking, reviews

the hiking options and the safety precautions for the next day. He challenges everyone to reflect on their emotions and feelings as they hike throughout the day and encourages the youth to do some self-reflection. Everyone returns to his or her tents to head to bed. Some people are more scared than others are, some have hesitations, but everyone is excited and anxious to start their journey into the Grand Canyon.

The next morning, hikers rose and ate breakfast in different groups. The majority of the group decided to hike to the bottom, complete the 16.3-mile hike to the Colorado River, and back out. They ate breakfast and packed their bags for an early departure of 6:30 a.m. everyone piled into the 15-passenger vans and headed to the trailhead. Some adults had prescribed roles and two Pima County chaperones, Judith Keller and Josh Linsell, were the medics and sweepers. They were responsible for making sure everyone came out of the canyon safely. Everyone started together but after the first quarter, mile the group disperses and people go at a pace that is comfortable with them. Everyone has a hiking partner that has the same pace as you and not necessarily from the same county. These hiking partners become close friends as they challenge, encourage, care and keep one another company for the day. Once the ambassadors reach the bottom of the canyon, a majority of them decide to take a quick swim in the Colorado River. The water is freezing cold, but they jump in for the sense of refreshment and accomplishment. They eat their lunch and start the climb out of the canyon.

Going down into the Grand Canyon is easy and beautiful, but going up is another story. Everyone seems to start with a steady pace after lunch, but after half a mile, most start to slow down, realizing it is harder going uphill. At this time, some hiking partners change as they have a different pace than when they started. After the first mile, exhaustion starts to kick in, you realize your pack feels heavier than before, your legs burn, and your feet are sore. You know you have eight more miles to go. After the second and third mile, you start to wonder how far you have gone and how much is left. After fourth and half miles, there is a rest area where you can refill your water containers and take a quick break. You begin to look down and see what you have accomplished. However, the breaks must be brief so you are out before dark and gets extremely cold. After six miles, it becomes mental. You start to evaluate your actions, beliefs, and capabilities; you want to quit and give up, you cannot possibly take one more step. At some point, you decide you can and you push yourself to keep breathing, walking, climbing, and conquering the trail.

The last three miles, are the longest you have ever hiked in your entire life. It feels like you have at least another ten left to go because of the seventy-eight endless switchbacks. At each turn, you hope to see the end but it is more trail to climb and feels like they get longer and steeper. At this point, it is mental; you are exhausted, sore, and done. The power of your will and determination makes your legs move and your perseverance numbs the pain. Your attitude has to be the driver on the entire hike and it is more important than ever at this point. You will not allow the last mile to win after you have worked hard for hours. You push through the negative feelings, you ignore the physical pain, and you exceed past your previous limits. When you finally see the end of the trail, you feel like you have conquered the world. You start to feel accomplished and the first steps on the asphalt outside the canyon never felt so good. A lot of the ambassadors express their

emotions differently at that point, some cry, others laugh, yell, and some are quiet and just raise their hands as they have crossed the finish line. What is going on in their mind is something we will never know but we all know it associates with victory. After the hike, all the Ambassadors took a well-deserved and needed shower. Some say it is the best \$2.00 they have ever spent. Some of the adult staff stay at camp and have a hot meal ready for everyone when they return. Later that night, the ambassadors and adults gather around the campfire and share their stories with one another. You hear a lot of laughter, clapping, sharing and relationships strengthened. Some ambassadors and adults head straight to bed to get a good night's sleep.

When we loaded into the vans in Nogales at the beginning of our trip, we expected to visit one of the seven wonders and meet other 4-H members and staff. As we left the canyon at the end of trip, I realized that the experience taught me more about my own abilities and myself than I have ever thought. The ambassadors that return from the Grand Canyon summit do not come back as the same individual. Nogales is a border town that is home to mainly Latinos with Mexican values and foundations. 4-H has made a positive impact in our community and the youth have greatly benefited from the work of the UACE Santa Cruz County 4-H program. As a past 4-H Healthy Living Ambassador, this program encouraged me to attend college, make a difference in my community, and discover my talents and strengths. Now as an employee, I continue to share my passion for nutrition, adapting a better lifestyle, and education with others. I am grateful for all my experiences in 4-H and the opportunities it has provided to me. United Healthcare through the Food Smart Families Program funds the 4-H Healthy Living Ambassadors program. If you would like more information regarding the 4-H programs, please contact Amanda Zamudio at the UACE Office (520) 281-2994 or email azamudio@email.arizona.edu

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