

Steve Irsik – part 3

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Prometo: Mi cabeza para pensar claramente, mi corazon para mayor lealtad, mis manos para mejor servicio...” No, I don't speak Spanish, but I have learned that those are the opening words of the 4-H pledge in Spanish. Today we'll meet an innovative 4-H club which is helping extend the benefits of 4-H to a new dimension of Spanish-speaking families. It's today's Kansas Profile.

This is the last profile in our three part series about Steve Irsik, an agricultural entrepreneur in southwest Kansas. We have previously learned about how his family developed their farming operation, including the creation of Royal Farms Dairy east of Garden City. Kyle Averhoff was brought in as manager. A key element to the success of such large, modern dairies is the workforce – many of which are Hispanic.

In October 2012, Steve Irsik contacted Debra Bolton, the Family and Consumer Sciences specialist for the southwest area of Kansas. “We were brainstorming how 4-H could reach more families,” Debra said. Specifically, they discussed how the benefits of 4-H could be applied to the newly immigrated families who had come to work in southwest Kansas.

“Royal Farms Dairy is home to over 14,000 cows and heifers and about 65 employees, many from El Salvador, Guatemala, and many other countries throughout Central America, South America and up through Mexico,” Kyle Averhoff said. “Southwest Kansas is an economic empire in how its developed and grown. Without the Hispanic culture and the culture of many other immigrant populations, it wouldn't have been possible,” he said.

K-State Research and Extension faculty in the southwest area developed a pilot program to reach out to this segment of the population. It was supported by State 4-H Leader Barbara Stone and the Kansas 4-H Foundation. Bertha Mendoza is a nutrition specialist in the Southwest area of Kansas, and her existing relationship with several Hispanic families was a major help.

These families and those of the workers at the dairies became a target for this innovative 4-H program. Alejandra Romero and Ruddy Yanez were hired as summer interns to assist with the project.

The goal was to create one club of 25 to 30 youth, but the interest grew faster than expected. The end result was four clubs involving 90 youth, with hundreds more on a waiting list. The clubs are located in Finney, Gray, and Kearney counties. These new 4-H members live in or near rural communities such as Garden City, Ingalls, Pierceville, and Deerfield, population 892 people. Now, that's rural.

The 4-H organization has been around for a long time, but it was new to these immigrant families. Club meetings were implemented bilingually. For example, the 4-H pledge would be said in Spanish and then in English. The club involved youth, parents and even grandparents. “The concept of 4-H caught on,” Debra Bolton said. “This 4-H club is more than youth development, it is family development. It's family, it's education, it's learning, it's all the things that integrate a family into a community,” she said.

“They are very family focused,” Kyle Averhoff said of his working Hispanic families. “We think that 4-H is a nice add-on to that, to help their children have opportunities to develop. We can look at countless stories of how our employees have grown and how their children have grown and become successful members of society,” he said.

“It’s created such a great learning community,” Debra Bolton said. “It’s even received national recognition. The National 4-H Council wants one of our 4-Hers to sing at the national gala.”

“The more we can do for the children, that’s going to lift up the whole family,” Steve Irsik said. “It will truly lift up these families.”

“Mi salud para mayor bienestar, para mi club, mi comunidad, mi patria, mi mundo.” Those are the closing words of the 4-H pledge in Spanish. We salute Steve Irsik, Kyle Averhoff, Barbara Stone, Debra Bolton, Bertha Mendoza, Alejandra Romero, Ruddy Yanez, and all those involved who are making a difference by helping more families experience the benefits of 4-H in a whole new way. I believe this is very good: Muy bueno.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.