

My 4H Story
By Tressa McCurdy
Cotton City 4-H Group
Hidalgo County
Junior essay winner

My name is Tressa and I would like to tell you my 4H story.

My Family moved to Rodeo, New Mexico, from Carrollton, Texas, two years ago. Carrollton is a suburb of North Dallas, so our move to the country was a big change for me, one I really was excited about.

I started my 6th grade year in Animas School. While I was making new friends and trying to find the group of kids that I fit in with best, I met an older girl who really set me in the right direction. Her name was Kelsie Orphy and she was the reason I joined 4-H.

Kelsie invited me to come to a meeting and I really thought it sounded like fun. I was very interested in agriculture, animals, crafts, and other things so it seemed a good match for me. I didn't really know anyone well but the other kids smiled at me; and the ones I had interacted with at school made me feel very welcome.

My projects I selected for the year: market lambs, photography, and beginning horsemanship. My Dad had been in FFA and shown lambs, and has ridden horses all his life, so I knew I had a teacher right there to guide me through these projects. This would be my 7th grade year since I joined in the winter of my 6th. It was all kind of scary, new school, new friends, and new environment. But even though, believe it or not, I can be shy at times, I was ready to get out there and do my best.

I met Mrs. Elbrock and set up a time to pick out lambs. My mom brought my cousins with us and we all picked out lambs. I picked out two so mine wouldn't be alone. We knew it would be a few weeks before they came home with us, so we began making plans to build their shelter and pens. Then things got harder. My Dad's business sent him away on a contract to Oregon, and he would be gone at least six months. My Mom and I grew up in the city and we knew absolutely ZERO about lambs. But I was not going to give up. We helped Dad pack to go and we were really sad. This was going to be the year my family learned to be strong. I learned how to be responsible to help our little ranch home continue to grow, do my projects, and do well in school.

The very next weekend my Mom and I and two friends from church stretched fencing over the poles my Dad had set to build a barn. Then we used hammers and nails and what my Mom calls "Women's Ingenuity" to make a house for my lambs. We finished one stall with OSB and boards, and because the roof was too tall for us to build on, we made a temporary one out of metal roofing just five feet tall so the lambs had a safe, dry and warm place for winter.

We got feed buckets and a big water trough and put them in place. We raked and raked together until there was not a rock anywhere we could find, and I checked every inch of that big pen for wire that would poke or cut the lambs, splinters, nails, or anything that would make it unsafe. We made a gate for the pen out of heavy welded wire with chicken wire that we tie wired onto it to keep dogs or coyotes or anything from sneaking in. Then we were ready for the lambs, and that was an adventure too.

One day Mrs. Elbrock called and said the lambs were ready to come home. We didn't have anything you could call a stock trailer; just a small 5x8 trailer we had made to haul camping equipment we had used in our move a few trips from Texas. We cleaned it out and put netting

over the top to make sure it was safe and strong to bring our lambs home. Mom had me check every floor board, and we put in straw to make a nice bed for them to travel in.

With a lot of help from Mrs. Elbrock we got those lambs loaded in the trailer and brought them home. They were cute but wild and wanted to run. I climbed in the top of the trailer and got a harness on them each and then we pushed, pulled, and chased them into the pen. When Mom slammed that gate shut, I was in the pen with them. We looked at each other and all we could do was laugh!

I spent an hour with them just hand feeding them and trying to tame them some. I remember those first nights. I was so worried about them I would get up and go out with a flashlight and check them two or three times to make sure they were safe.

Because my Dad was in Oregon, I didn't have a mentor for Horsemanship, but I did continue with photography. I was working in the Rodeo store to buy a good digital camera for my project (because I love taking pictures); and with my new camera I took pictures everyday everywhere I went, often annoying my friends and family. On road trips I would be there with my camera hanging out the window, trying to get good shots of nature, historical places, people, animals, you name it.

I worked with my lambs everyday and went to workshops at Mrs. Elbrock's, asked tons of advice from older 4-H members who showed lambs, and did my best to get ready. My Dad did not get home for the first time I showed. It was a crazy day. My brother was leaving on a plane for college, my Mom had to take him and come back to the fair to see me. When I went into the ring with my first lamb, I was so nervous. By the end of the show, both of my lambs showed well (one bucked a little). I ended up with a 4th and a 5th after all the moving around and waiting. I didn't make it to the sale, so I got to take the girls home. I still have them by the way, and they are a great help around the back 40 eating weeds!

My photography however was another total story. I placed very well in several categories, bringing home a first, and a couple of second and a third in Black and White. I proudly distributed my pictures to people who really made a difference for me at the first fair. I gave the one of Mount Shasta to our Ag teacher, Mr. Moore, and the Black and White of the water tower to my Uncle Brendon, and the wild flower picture that got a blue ribbon to my neighbor Pat who also takes pictures. So even though I didn't do as well as I wanted to in market lambs, my photography entries really balanced that out for me.

My first fair was very much a day of laughter and tears. It was hard for my Mom and me without my Dad, but we made it through because of the friendships and community we had with the 4-H group and the teachers from school. Beyond the fair each year, I have really enjoyed baking cakes for the sale at the 4H dance. I love to cook so those kind of fundraisers are the best for me. I also have had fun just at plain old clean up days and meetings, although sometimes it is very hard to get to meetings when our Volleyball and Basketball schedules overlap.

This year, 2008, I decided to get involved again with market lambs. I also signed up for photography as well as Interior Design, and Scrapbooking. Although I had wanted to do leatherworking with my Dad and poultry, my three lambs arrived this year. It was chaos and I had to choose to downsize my projects.

This year I was much more confident with the handling of my lambs, and with my camera as well. As we live quite a few miles south of Rodeo, I was required to be very self-motivated as I was not always aware or able to attend group classes. I did do training again with Mrs. Elbrock, and the fact that she comes out and visits all the kids, makes sure we are sheared,

organized and ready to go makes all the difference in the world to someone like me. Words don't say enough of how we appreciate her.

With Photography I went on my usual adventures, and sometimes my Mom and I would go on a drive to Portal or Tucson. My Dad's schedule brought him home at least half the time this year, so he could be involved in my projects and give me advice, occasionally teasing me about my lambs escaping. I did not have a leader for interior design so I read the workbook and decided on a simple project of pillows which I'm proud to say won first place at Hidalgo County Fair as well as the State Fair. On my photography, I stayed focused, and at county won a Best of Show, five blue ribbons as well as two red. I think I am ready for a camera upgrade now!

I spent a lot of time with my lambs. Sometimes after a busy day working on our land or with homework, I would just go out and sit and read with them. I wanted them to really trust me so they would be better on the day of the show.

I would run them up the hill to the canyons and downhill to the reservoir, or sometimes just around the fount yard in circles. I wanted to keep them lean and muscled, not overfed and squishy. As lambs will do, they did escape a few times over the summer and come up to the deck looking for me! But this year, in addition to the half-finished barn in its place is a completed barn, and goats, stalls, and the acres are fenced. At night I did sleep better knowing they were safe.

This year the competition was tough! My friends in the 4-H group all had excellent looking lambs. There were so many that the pens were overflowing. My lambs placed a 5 and an 8, and one placed 10 in the lineup. I brought them home to join the herd, and somewhere in here I think is the beginning of a wool project or maybe animal husbandry. I made a very special scrapbook as my project for that category, but in the end I didn't enter it because it was for my brother and is very personal. I can't wait for him to open it at Christmas when he is home to visit.

During these past two years of 4-H activity, sometimes I had to give up parties or other activities to care for my animals or make meetings (when it wasn't a required school team game), and sometimes it was hard. But I believed that the caring of my animals and the commitment I made to be at 4-H was an important part of growing up and becoming more responsible for me. I am grateful for my beginning two years in 4-H. Sometimes the drive to things can get me down, but I feel like I am a kid who is doing something better than sitting on a computer all day or playing video games. I am learning skills and having fun and experiences that will last me a lifetime. I am meeting friends that like me, and want to do something special.

Next year I have signed up for market lambs, steers, and photography. I picked three categories that I know are very hard work, but I know I can do them and keep up my A/B honor roll as I have since coming to Animas, as well as my sports. Next year I am hopeful for a leadership position as I will qualify for one, and I hope to be able to encourage someone like I was encouraged to come and join, have fun, and be part of the group.