

Students at Locust Trace Learning Community Service Through Chicken Project

By Tim Thornberry

Students at the Fayette County school district's Locust Trace Agriscience Farm are getting a firsthand look at animal agriculture from the beginning stages to processing thanks to a poultry project funded by an FFA Food for All Grant.

The students raise both broilers and layers, learning the processes involved in all aspects of poultry and egg production. A unique feature of the project is community driven, as the eggs and processed chickens are being donated to the local food pantry.

Shane Norris, the Large and Small Animal Program instructor at the agri-school, said the project allows students to experience community service through animal science in the classroom as well as the lab.

"The infrastructure to get both layers and broilers came through the grant with the understanding we donate the eggs and broilers to God's Pantry," he said. "We were also able to partner with Kentucky State University (KSU) using their mobile processing unit."

Students are able to go to KSU and participate in that processing for consumption stage of the program, something many, having come from an urban setting, never experienced.

Norris said in addition to the community service aspect, the students are able to see chicken-raising on a scale they can replicate.

"They can raise their own chicks and have their own eggs, and it's smaller operations they could have in their own backyards," he said. "Also, they learn how to properly manage feeding and watering along with the proper responsibility and how crucial it is to provide for and sustain the chickens while they are here."

Students must do many things in raising chickens to guarantee maximum results, such as collect eggs daily and record how many from each chicken they gather; measure the feed and make sure the animals are getting the proper amounts; and weigh the chickens regularly and record those weights to measure weight gain in relation to amount each is fed.

Norris said students have given mixed reviews to taking the birds for processing, with some having no problems and others realizing what takes place at this stage.

"Some say, 'I understand why it's here, but I don't want to come back.' But I want them to understand we have the cheapest, safest food source in the world and there are reasons why," he said. "We talk about why a flock is raised and, at the end of that, it is used for our consumption. And there will be an end," he said. "It's not like a pet. We try not to humanize it and make sure we keep a little distance. The ultimate goal of many livestock facilities is to raise animals for meat purposes."

Catherine "Cat" Jones is a senior at Locust Trace. Although she was raised in the city, she loves animals and is using her experience at the school to move on to Morehead State University next year to become a veterinarian technician for large animals.

She said her family has always emphasized the need to not waste food, something that helps her understand all the processes of raising the chickens.

“My dad said if you are going to eat it, you should know where it comes from, and he would always tell us, ‘You know this food was once an animal.’ You have to respect that and not waste food, and he thought it was a great idea that we were doing this project.”

Jones added that she has always loved animals and, by coming to the school, she has found an outlet for that admiration.

“I have always loved animals, and getting to come here and to work with the animals is great because I’ve had this fascination all my life but I’ve never had an outlet for it. Now that I’ve been here, I know what I want to do,” she said.

Jones added that she thinks many people take their food for granted because they don’t understand the work that goes into producing it. She said going through the project and participating helps her to know better about where her food comes from and how it got there.

Mickie Lynn, another senior at Locust Trace, has had the benefit of growing up on the farm and understanding animal agriculture. She said there’s more to the school and this project than just learning to raise a chicken.

“I have learned to manage a farm. I have taken nearly every class here, including equine, ag communications, advanced animal science and biotechnology. Here you learn so much,” she said.

This year the school will donate 90 chickens and countless dozens of eggs to the food pantry. Norris said now is a good time to make the donations since food supplies have been depleted because of holiday demands.

“Donations kind of slow down after Christmas, and hopefully we can help get the shelves stocked up with this protein source,” he said.

As far as donating the food to God’s Pantry, Jones said she has worked with the pantry before through her church.

“I think it’s great because I’ve seen the people that go there and they are grateful for the food, and if they understand that high school students put their hearts into this, they’ll see we’re not all conceited and think we own the world,” she said. “I love the fact that I helped put food in someone’s belly.”

Sara Tracy serves as Locust Trace’s community liaison. She said the link between the school and a community service project like the one with God’s Pantry is important, especially since the second-year school is so new.

“It’s a crucial part of our education in helping our students understand the community around them, the support and, especially, the sustainability aspect of it. We try to teach all that when we do these projects with our community partners,” she said.

While the grant has been spent, it was done in such a way so the project can continue for years to come if so desired. Tracy said she hopes to develop the chicken project enough to include the local Farm to School program and contribute some of the food to the local school system as well as the food pantry.

To learn more about Locust Trace Agriscience Farm, go to <http://www.techcenters.fcps.net/locustrace>.