

# 4-H animals help teens cope with loss, learn responsibility and find peace

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Greg Bryan/Arizona Daily SunKatie Treece, 15, a member of the Doney Park 4-H club the Cinderhillbillies sits with her lamb Skittles Saturday. Treece will participate in this weekend's Coconino County Fair.To order this photo, go to <http://photos.azdailysun.com>

Greg Bryan/Arizona Daily SunCharlie Thomason, 16, stands with his steer Gladiator, pig Ham Her Up, and goat Nemo outside his Doney Park home Saturday. Thomason is a member of the Doney Park 4-H club the Cinderhillbillies and will be taking his animals to the Coconino County Fair. To order this photo, go to <http://photos.azdailysun.com>

Charlie Thomason, 16, gently lifts his Champagne D'Argent rabbit and places it on top of its wooden hutch. Born completely black, the now-silvery rabbit huddles calmly on its platform, allowing Charlie to firmly bunch its body into the position required to show this breed.

Not far away, 15-year-old Katie Treece caresses her 5-month-old lamb, Skittles, and demonstrates how he must stand while being shown. He is the best lamb she's ever raised, and she's hoping he'll be Grand Champion Lamb this year.

The teens will put all of their efforts to the test this weekend, when they show these and other animals at the 55th Annual Coconino County Fair.

Katie and Charlie are members and youth leaders of the Doney Park 4-H club the Cinderhillbillies. Each has been in the group for seven years and worked with a variety of animals. They have learned skills and talents they will carry with them into their adult lives, not to

mention a great love for animals.

Both attend Coconino High School and confess that life gets pretty hectic once school starts, especially in the days leading up to the fair. Charlie gets up at 5:30 every morning to care for 13 goats, more chickens than he can count, a steer named Gladiator, a pig named Ham Her Up and his rabbit, all of which he'll take to the fair. He also works two jobs.

Katie rises at 6 a.m. to care for her lambs (Skittles and Raisin), her horse (Dusky), and her steer (Bruce Almeaty), plus she participates in high school rodeo once a month.

"It's kind of hard to do all these things during the school year," she says.

Katie's 12-year-old sister, Cabrina, wakes every morning at 5:30 and spends an hour caring for 14 chickens, two pigs, two goats, a lamb and a horse. Of the constant work during her three years of 4-H experience, she says, "It's fun. It's not hard."

Cabrina will auction a pig and a goat at the fair. Is it difficult to part with the animals?

"It's hard when they get on the truck. You get used to it after a while," says Cabrina.

The truck transports the animals to the butcher. Anyone may purchase an animal from the 4-H Auction at the fair, and while some animals are taken home for pets or for future projects, remaining animals are taken to a butcher previously arranged by the auction committee.

Katie notes, "The first three years it's really hard. Afterward, it's easy. You don't get too attached."

For Charlie, the first two years of auctioning pigs were difficult, until he recognized the business nature of the deal. He now feels that at least the animals receive some love during their lives, as opposed to the lack of human contact they would receive at a feed lot.

But this lesson hasn't helped him part with a steer.

"It's still hard to let him go, to just say 'goodbye' after almost a year of raising him, making him your friend," he says. Gladiator, a 1,300-pound pure-bred Shorthorn, knows his own name, Charlie can talk to him, and "sometimes it's like he talks back to me. It's hard not to develop a relationship."

For Gladiator to look his best, Charlie has washed him daily for the last two or three weeks. This involves placing him in a "blocking chute," a metal frame intended to hold his head still and keep him calm while he's washed, dried and clipped. Regular

household shampoo is used on his sprayed-down body; then pet clippers are used on his facial hair and on certain parts of his coat to help create the desired boxy, squared-off look.

While giving a tour of her family's 5-acre property, Katie wears a large belt buckle she won during last year's horse show, held the weekend before the actual fair starts. She and Dusky participated yesterday in the Western horse show. She's won a total of five buckles, and when asked how many trophies she has, she doesn't know. Last year, she took Grand Champion Steer. In 2000 and 2001, she was awarded Junior Lamb Showman, and in 2002 she received the Premier Exhibitor Award, a \$100 prize given by the Arizona National Livestock Show.

Charlie has won 14 belt buckles in all, including those from Yavapai County and State Fairs. He competed against 30 in his class last year to win a belt buckle from the State Fair for All-around Intermediate Showmanship for dairy goats. He has won several Round Robin Showmanship awards for large stock, including grand champion and reserve champion awards from the Yavapai County Fair. His less-than-2-month-old calf beat a yearling last year to take the highest prize, Supreme Champion Bull, at the Yavapai County Fair.

Though the teens have prizes, awards and cash to show for their dedication, and they enjoy the competition, they've also acquired important skills and developed a strong work ethic. Charlie says he's learned team-building, trust, group skills, and he now feels more comfortable interacting with others in a leadership capacity. Katie acknowledges that friendship has proved to be important in her 4-H experience. "I know a lot more people now," she says, "and I've learned responsibility. I have more of that now." When she's done with 4-H, she plans to continue to care for horses, with an emphasis in rehabilitation.

"Yes, I want to continue to have animals when I'm done with 4-H," asserts Charlie. "I've been around animals so long; I don't know

how I would get along without them. I feel like I need animals to be who I am, my identity. So I can be at peace."

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