



4-H'er Kellie Lamoreaux poses with leader Donna Wahl at the Pima County Fair.

"Bunny Lady" is Self-Taught Expert

By Dale Quinn*



When East Side resident Donna J. Wahl moved to Tucson with her husband, Charlie, and two children 30 years ago, she never imagined she'd one day be referred to as the "Bunny Lady." For more than 20 years, Wahl was a leader of Pima County's 4-H rabbit group. She took on the role after her daughter received a rabbit as a gift for her fifth birthday. Her son also liked the animal and got one of his own. He joined 4-H, and a few years later Wahl was the leader of the rabbit group. When she started, she knew very little about rabbits.

"I learned right along with the kids, and I think that's part of the fun of it," she said. And learn she did. Now, Wahl has become an authority on rabbits.

She's passed on the torch as leader of the rabbit group. But when people have questions about rabbit care, breeding or showmanship, they ask for Donna Wahl.

Julie Adamcin, who's worked with Pima County 4-H Youth Development for more than 35 years, said Wahl and a handful of other leaders have achieved a "mother superior" status in the county.

"These are the people who have the character and diligence that if you do it, you do it right," she said.

Wahl was a mentor for kids in the program, who in turn spread their knowledge to younger kids,

Adamcin said. She provided guidance to other adult leaders, who learned from the effective way she dealt with children.

"That's the spark that holds kids in the program," Adamcin said. "When the kid knows the volunteer cares about them as an individual, as a person."

Now, Wahl has turned her love of animals and the Tucson area into art. Some of her work is on display at the Feminine Mystique Art Gallery in Tubac, about 45 miles south of

Tucson.

Wahl paints colorful depictions of the desert around the Tucson area. She

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4-H Memorial Scholarship Fund

Do you have a favorite 4-H leader who made an impact in your life? One longtime Pima County 4-H volunteer has established a memorial scholarship fund within the Arizona 4-H Youth Foundation to honor current and past volunteers. Contact Lee Duerringer at 520-626-5072 to see how you can honor your favorite volunteers.

Arizona Cooperative Extension



paints coyotes, birds and — of course — rabbits.

Wahl has been passionate about visual communication for a long time.

She attended the University of Wisconsin with a major in art. She had a career in print when she moved to Tucson. Her connections in the rabbit community led her to become the editor of Dwarf Digest Magazine, a quarterly newsletter focusing on a specific breed of rabbit.

Wahl began painting to provide gifts for her family and friends, but then a family member encouraged her to share her work with more people.

She never seriously considered showing her artwork in a gallery. But when she brought her portfolio to the Feminine Mystique Art Gallery, they agreed to display some of her pieces.

Adrienne Quinn, an artist and employee at the Feminine Mystique, said the gallery gives aspiring female artists a venue to display their work. She said Wahl's work has shown improvement in the year it's been displayed.

"She looks like a self-taught artist who puts a lot of effort into her work," Quinn said.

During her 4-H years, Wahl said she never considered herself a natural leader, though the rabbit program grew to consist of more than 50 members at one point under her leadership.

Sometimes her house teemed with kids, their parents and dozens of rabbits.

Adamcin said Wahl exhibits ideal leadership skills, though she might not realize it.

"You have leadership if people follow you," Adamcin said. At one time, her family had 140 rabbits living in the rabbitry beside their house. Her daughter was interested in genetics and studied the way the rabbits passed their traits from one generation to the next.

For a while, her home off Old Spanish Trail just south of Saguaro National Park East was like a "bunny Humane Society," Wahl said. If people wanted a rabbit, they came to her. They did the same if they wanted to give one up for adoption.

With the kids out of the house, she's got only nine rabbits hopping around the shed beside her home. For her, being a 4-H leader and raising rabbits was more than just an obsession with the fuzzy little creatures.

She took pleasure in spending time with her children and building connections with people in the community.

"I enjoy the animals," she said. "But it was basically a tool to help these kids build life skills."

She remembers a 9-year-old girl who came into her group too shy to emerge from behind mother's legs.

Later that same girl became a junior leader and helped other young rabbit raisers with their animals.

Now, if anybody has questions about how to "show" a rabbit in front of judges — how to emphasize its breeding strengths and downplay its weaknesses — they talk to the "Bunny Lady," Donna Wahl. ■

Arizona 4-H Youth Development

While 4-H in Arizona had its beginnings in rural areas, it has grown to serve young people and volunteers from the major urban centers and suburban communities as well. Today's 4-H still has science and technology as its foundation. In addition, many projects are in personal growth and development and healthy lifestyle education. 4-H is helping young people become mature, competent adults capable of participation and leadership in their communities with valuable skills on entry into the workforce.

The University of Arizona is the land-grant institution of the state of Arizona. Its three-pronged mission of teaching, research and outreach includes 4-H Youth Development as the youth outreach component of Cooperative Extension, the major outreach component of the university.

cals.arizona.edu/4-H

Call for Arizona 4-H Memorabilia

Special memories or memorabilia are being sought to be shared at the Arizona 4-H Museum at the UA's Maricopa Agricultural Center, part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. For more information contact Vic Jimenez at 520-568-2273, vjimenez@ag.arizona.edu.