



The 4-H Shooting Sports Program is the largest of its kind in the U.S.—and maybe the world—so how come not everybody knows about it?

By Brian McCombie

In his 25-plus years involved with the 4-H Shooting Sports Program, John Kvasnicka has seen the program grow from 350 young shooters and 25 adult volunteers to 300,000 youngsters today and over 45,000 adults volunteers, spread out over 46 states.

"We are the largest, fastest-growing program area within the total 4-H program," Kvasnicka explains. "We're also the largest youth shooting sports program in the United States. Actually, the NRA told us we're the largest in the world. But we don't get a lot of attention. We're kind of a well-hidden secret."

But hold on: Isn't 4-H all about kids raising cows and crops? About making jams and jellies and having a booth at the county fair? Well, yes and no. As Kvasnicka says, "4-H was founded upon the agricultural sector 100 years ago." The main emphasis, then and now, is on helping young people to be the best adults they can be, by developing qualities like responsibility, decision-making, teamwork and good citizenship.

Over the years, though, the U.S. population left the farm for large cities and suburbs. To accommodate this change, 4-H, administered by county agricultural extension agencies, began adding non-agricultural classes and activities to its offerings. New activities included outdoor recreation, which included shooting.

4-H shooting began informally in Texas over 30 years ago, when several 4-H chapters offered shoot-

ing for youngsters. By the late 1970s, a more formal shooting program was launched by the Brazos County 4-H. Eventually, and with financial help from the National Rifle Association and Federal Cartridge, a national shooting sports program was designed.

Currently, Texas probably has the top state enrollment in 4-H Shooting Sports, with more than 11,000 young shooters, says Ron Howard, a professor and agricultural extension specialist at Texas A&M University who oversees 4-H shooting there. But New York State is closing in fast, he adds, as the popularity of 4-H shooting continues to grow.

In general, a state 4-H shooting program holds an introductory shooting class for young people. Firearms safety and general knowledge are stressed; youngsters are introduced to a variety of firearms and types of shooting, too. After this introduction, the young people decide which types of shooting they want to focus on—smallbore rifles, for example, or shotgun sports—spending time on the shooting range and/or in formal competitions. Minimum age requirements depend on the state and can range from eight to 12 years old.

Interestingly, 4-H shooters are not usually from rural areas, at least in New York State. "Actually, the hardest group we have to work with are the most remote or the most rural people," says William Schwerd, 4-H shooting coordinator for New York. People in these areas can often go out into their backyards, literally, to shoot and therefore don't feel the need to join a shooting program. "What we're finding is that suburbia and some of the small towns are the places we're getting most of our involvement from," Schwerd adds. "These people need places to shoot."

In Texas, Howard says, youngsters from eight to 19 can shoot in 4-H. While rural youth are well represented, non-rural youngsters are a big part of the program, too. "Almost all of our major cities have 4-H shooting programs," says Howard. "The Dallas/Fort Worth area has five separate programs, Houston has four, and there's a huge shooting program in San Antonio."

The Texas program was growing at 10 to 15 percent annually until an economic slowdown dropped 2005's growth rate to just 3 percent. Texas is also seeing an increase in first-time shooters who are 13 and above. Young women like 4-H shooting, too. Howard notes that at 4-H shooting competitions, females now make up 15 to 20 percent of participants. Overall, females represent an impressive 40 percent of the state's 4-H shooters.

"We're in the midst of one of those boom periods in the

4-H Shooting Sports Program here in New York," says Schwerd. "That has a lot to do with just people being more interested in the outdoors and shooting in general." Right now, New York has at least 10,000 youngsters aged 12 to 19 enrolled in 4-H shooting, and they are assisted by more than 350 volunteer certified shooting instructors.

Schwerd adds that 4-H is bringing adults into shooting, too. When a youngster's in 4-H shooting in New York, for example, an adult parent or guardian can accompany him or her during the shooting program. If there's a fee, the adult is charged only half price. "We want the adults there," Schwerd says. "We want the kids to participate with the adults they'll be shooting with at home."

The shooting industry and conservation organizations very much support the 4-H program. The list includes the National Association of Sporting Goods Wholesalers, National Shooting Sports Foundation, USA Shooting Sports and the NRA—as well as manufacturers such as Hornady, Leupold, Federal and Daisy. They provide money, merchandise and volunteer hours.

"Our industry and organization supporters are very committed to the 4-H shooting program," says Kvasnicka. "We couldn't do this without them."

The New York program is aided by both the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Federation, says Schwerd. In Texas, "We get an outstanding amount of help from the Texas State Rifle Association, the state NRA affiliate," Howard says, as well as the Texas Trapshooters Association and Texas Skeet Shooters Association.

Kate Jewett, of Alamo, California, is a 17-year-old high school senior. She's also a 4-H shooter. She entered the program when she was 12 after a couple trips to the shooting range with her dad got her thinking that shooting might be fun. Today, Jewett shoots smallbore rifle, shotgun and archery for 4-H. And she loves it.

"4-H shooting sports have taught me responsibility, patience and dedication," Jewett says, who is also a shooting sports ambassador for California 4-H. "I love that it is a sport anyone can do, no matter age or physical condition. You also don't need to have started at a young age to excel in it."

Jewett's also helped introduce her friends to shooting. "Though I never would have believed it, my friends have become increasingly interested in shooting and nag me to bring them along most weekends," Jewett says. "It is not the average way for a bunch of 17-year-old girls to spend the weekend. But they all love it now."

For more information, check out www.4-hshootingsports.org.