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Children of deployed parents raise public awareness about hardships

Maren Vik knows all about the stress faced by children of soldiers deployed in the National Guard or Reserves. Her father was deployed in Iraq for a year while she was a new student at Lincoln North Star High School.

"It was a critical time for me and to have a parent gone was hard," Vik said.

Now Vik is one of about 10 teens from across Nebraska spreading the word about the problems encountered by children of military personnel. She is participating in Speak Out for Military Kids, a part of the Operation Military Kids (OMK) program supported by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

Speak Out for Military Kids is a community outreach program in which teenagers speak publicly about how children are affected when a parent is deployed, said Mark Simmons, extension educator based in Omaha. Along with extension, the military and schools, other partners in the program include the American Legion and its auxiliary and Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

"The main focus is to raise awareness of why it's important to support these kids," Simmons said.

Children whose parents are stationed at Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue have a support system around them, but most affected children scattered throughout Nebraska do

not, Simmons said.

Sometimes these children feel isolated, especially if no other student in their schools has a deployed parent. Sometimes they drop out of sports and other extracurricular activities because the parent at home takes another job and the student has to stay home with younger siblings.

Although extension had been participating in military kids activities, OMK officially started in Nebraska in October 2005 after extension received a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Army and the USDA, Simmons said. Extension recently received a second \$50,000 grant to continue the program for a second year.

One program within OMK is Speak Out for Military Kids. Simmons eventually hopes to have one teen in each of Nebraska's counties speaking to school assemblies, civic groups and other organizations about children of military parents.

Vik, now a North Star senior, talks to organizations about how she felt when her father missed her 16th birthday and was unable to attend her volleyball games. After her talks, people express amazement over the stress faced by military children and thank her for speaking out, she said.



Brett Hampton

Maren Vik (left) and Erica Anderson of Lincoln participate in extension's Speak Out for Military Kids program. Participants give public speeches about problems faced by children of military personnel.

"I've always been really passionate about the sacrifices the military makes for us and I'm appreciative of soldiers like my dad," Vik said.

Extension also is planning another year of Ready Set Go trainings, in which five communities will be awarded mini-grants from extension to provide an educational program about military children, Simmons said.

Simmons is a member of a team of Nebraskans, including military, school and student representatives, who travel to the communities in the spring to teach the program.

OMK also provides scholarships to teens to attend 4-H camps and Big Red Summer Academic Camps, Simmons said.

—Lori McGinnis

Simmons can be contacted at (402) 561-7575.

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Dean's comments

What better way to seek answers, than to ask?

That's what University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension did to discover when and where the public thinks we as extension are at our very best, and what future educational programming areas we need to address.

Who better to ask these questions of the public than extension board members?

Governing boards in each county where extension is housed assist extension staff in establishing and accomplishing our program goals and objectives. Board members also assist in developing an operating budget and local educational priorities.

They are in touch with many people, both those familiar with extension and those unfamiliar. And because they are in touch with so many people, they are in a unique position to advocate or tell the extension story.

Surveying the public began about a year ago, when an extension educator team of Dennis Bauer, Gail Brand, Cathy Johnston, Brent Plugge and Gary Zoubek (under the guidance of Alan Baquet and Keith Niemann) coordinated survey training for extension board members.

Then, over a period of months, extension board members talked to 1,025 people in 73 counties: farmers, ranchers, professionals, hourly wage earners, business owners, youth, government officials and people involved with industry/manufacturing.

Board members found 73 percent of respondents were familiar with us. Typical responses included: Extension is very ap-

proachable and has a desire to help clients, even when it means finding the answer from multiple sources. Respondents said they appreciate extension's accessibility and reliability, citing a broad scope of common sense and useful information. They appreciate the direct link the people of Nebraska have to university expertise. One person noted extension is "the place to go" when problems arise.

People said they value extension's instant-access, unbiased information, and the fact that extension professionals are engaged in communities and community activities all across the state.

We thank the public for taking time to provide their thoughtful responses, and we thank extension board members for their time and

expertise in asking the questions. Board members are an excellent extension resource for potential new audiences — audiences that may very well include the 27 percent of survey respondents who said they were unfamiliar with extension. Very soon we hope they will know more about us and the knowledge we provide for life.

With continued input from the public, extension board members, and our valued faculty and staff, we will continue building extension's advocacy base.

We will continue to analyze the survey results, talk with more individuals, and continue to seek innovative ways to serve today's Nebraska and meet tomorrow's needs. Stay tuned to hear more from University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

Elbert Dickey
Dean and Director
University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension



Elbert Dickey

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There is no charge for this newsletter. Each issue describes a few of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension's ongoing, widely diverse programs. The newsletter is an informal report to interested taxpayers. Please send comments, questions and subscription requests to: Editor, *UNL Extension Connect*, 108 Agricultural Communications Building, P.O. Box 830918, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0918.

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Partners with Nebraska

Land-grant universities work with the people they serve. NU's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources does so in priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people and communities. We teach, discover new knowledge through research, and extend that new, unbiased information across the state and beyond through extension.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension is part of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

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Busy honey bees fascinating hobby

Dave Hamilton of Lincoln is a master beekeeper not so much because he loves honey but because the small creatures fascinate him.

For others, knowing that bees provide a multi-billion dollar pollination service may be incentive to learn more about them.

Hamilton started his hobby by attending a University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension beginning beekeeping workshop in the early 1990s. He attended enough classes to become a certified master beekeeper and has up to 10 hives set up at his farm near Liberty.

“I keep bees at the farm because I enjoy them,” Hamilton said, noting his hobby is more to learn about bees than to get honey. “I have learned to love honeybees. Their lives are something that fascinate me to the point I read about everything I see and watch my bees to observe what I read.”

Extension’s beekeeping workshops have been led for more than a decade by Marion Ellis, beekeeping specialist. He teaches workshops twice a year in eastern and western Nebraska, totaling as many as 85 participants.



Marion Ellis

Honey bees are valued mainly as pollinators of fruit and vegetable crops.

Most participants want their bees to make honey, Ellis said, while others keep them for their main value: to pollinate fruit and vegetable crops. Ellis said the bees’ annual pollination value for fruit and vegetable crops in the United States is estimated at \$18.7 billion.

In 2006, 51 people participated in master beekeeping workshops, Ellis said. They visited schools to talk about honey bees, had articles published in nationally distributed trade journals and have helped youth in 4-H start beekeeping operations. Some also maintain observation hives for educational exhibits.

— **Lori McGinnis**

*Ellis can be contacted at
(402) 472-8696.*

100 computers donated from tech conference

When nearly 200 youth from 27 states met at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln last summer as participants in the National 4-H Technology Leadership Conference, they refurbished 100 computers for a nonprofit organization to distribute to people with disabilities.

Their work was part of conference goals to prepare youth for the 21st century technology-oriented workforce while offering a valuable service, said Brad Barker, UNL Extension 4-H science and technology specialist.

Donors throughout the state, including 4-H families and private companies, provided 160 original computers. Barker and other 4-H staff inventoried the donations to determine whether they were equipped with sufficient RAM, hard drive space and modems to be refurbished.

The project was funded through the Nebraska 4-H Foundation by PayPal, an eBay company that can send and receive payments online.

Although many of the conference participants are computer-proficient, few were familiar with how a computer actually functions, Barker

said. Yet in just four hours the youth, working in teams of five, disassembled and installed a workable operating system and made other needed updates in nearly 100 computers. The remaining 60 computers were recycled for parts.

As part of the service learning project, youth received computer tool kits and the basic tools to clean and refurbish computers in their communities. An estimated 48 million computers are discarded annually in the United States, Barker said.

The refurbished computers were delivered to Assistive Technology for All in Cozad. Ramona Gronewold, technology technician there, said this was the first time an organization donated this many fully functional, Internet-ready computers to the organization. The computers are being distributed to Nebraska children, people in vocational rehabilitation, senior citizens and others experiencing a disability.

— **Cheryl Alberts**

Barker can be contacted at (402) 472-9008.

Footprint tool projects wafting odor effects

A new University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension tool can help determine the best location for livestock facilities so wafting odors have the least amount of effect in the neighborhood.

The science-based Odor Footprint Tool consists of a set of graphs that can help determine the projected impact of odors on surrounding areas.

Rick Stowell, animal environmental engineer based in Lincoln, said the tool uses information about weather, especially wind direction, and the type and size of facility to determine how much separation distance, or “setback,” is needed between the facility and area residences.

The tool now is being used as a planning aid with livestock producers, many of whom are uncertain of how to assess the impact of proposed livestock facilities on the surrounding areas, Stowell said. Stowell and other developers have demonstrated it to more than 100 county officials.

Some county officials in Nebraska are examining the tool for possible use in agricultural zoning regulations for new or expanding facilities, Stowell said.

The tool has been piloted in Madison County.

One Friend producer who used the tool plans to install an air-filtering system in a 1,000-head hog barn, which Stowell said would result in a 90 percent reduction in odor in the treated airstream.

“This is extremely useful for producers and their advisers when they try to evaluate sites and the potential odor impact on neighbors,” Stowell said.

— **Lori McGinnis**

*Stowell can be contacted at
(402) 472-3912.*

Check out Extension’s

Web site at:

<http://extension.unl.edu>

Virtual presence provides benefits

The reality is, virtual is valuable. Connie Hancock, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educator based in Sidney, teaches people how to use virtual online programs such as eCommerce and overall eKnowledge. The know-how can be profitable for tourism and other industries.

“The delivery mode of information has absolutely changed in the last five years and will continue to change as people want information instantly,” Hancock said.

Hancock said South Sioux City in northeast Nebraska is considering a community-wide podcast, or Internet-based audio broadcast. When the broadcast is downloaded onto a portable MP3 player, it can bring a walking tour to life for tourists, Hancock said.

In northwest Nebraska’s Pine Ridge, lodging, hunting and recreation are offered by a group of 26 local farmers and ranchers through www.nebraskahighcountry.com. One participating entrepreneur is mapping Geographic Information System (GIS), coordinates so potential customers can find his place.

“People feel the need to be on the cutting edge. Small businesses know they can compete in the global market,” Hancock said.

Many classes taught by Hancock and others are held in the BIT (Business Information Technology) Mobile, a portable classroom with 14 laptop computers and other technology.

“We provide small businesses with a knowledge base of where to find information, helping them make wise decisions for their online storefront,” Hancock said, adding that the Internet is not a marketing end-all, and that some people still prefer to do business one-on-one.

Since March, Hancock and others have taken the BIT Mobile to 24 communities, teaching about 400 people, from high school students to senior citizens, about virtual knowledge.

— Cheryl Alberts

Hancock can be contacted at (308) 254-4455.

Fire prevention requires years of diligence; education

By all accounts the raging fires in northwest Nebraska during July and August 2006 were very fast, very hot and very, very dangerous.

Together Cherry, Dawes and Sioux counties lost 14 homes, with 12 more damaged. Around 75,000 acres of private and public grass and timber burned, fencelines with them. Two entire towns and a state college stood within feet of scorching.

With herculean efforts and sheer luck, no human lives were lost. Relatively few cattle died. Now work and education lie ahead.

“The fire was the easy part, believe it or not,” said Scott Cotton, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educator based in Chadron.

Cotton has fought fires and been on search and rescue missions for 27 years. Last summer one of the multiple Sioux-Dawes county fires entered his yard south of Chadron, burning his granary, horse trailer and more, before shifting winds took the fire 320 degrees around his house.

As red-hot embers rained on Chadron’s main street, fire came within 4 feet of 30 homes. Firefighters from about 50 volunteer departments and local, state and federal entities, working side-by-side – plus an upper level

atmosphere wind shift – stopped the fire within 100 feet of Chadron State College’s (CSC) football field and the fire’s command center in one of CSC’s high-rise dorms.

It could happen again.

Jay Jenkins, extension educator based in Valentine, said fires remain a real threat as drought continues. In Cherry County 10 homes were lost, and at least 10 more damaged. About 3,100 acres burned in the July 16-17 fire sparked by a faulty power line.

Lightning started what became six Dawes-Sioux county fires that raged July 24-Aug. 7, burning four homes and about 73,000 acres.

Even as fire burned the scenic Pine Ridge and county fairs went on in Dawes and Sioux counties, the region’s extension educators pooled experiences and skills to address immediate and future needs.

Jenny Nixon, extension educator based in Harrison, Cotton and Jenkins talked with people one-on-one, fielded scores of calls, and pulled together educational and informational resources.

Within two weeks of each fire, extension coordinated full informational workshops with presentations by extension and more than a dozen other organizations, including CSC.

Chuck Butterfield, CSC associate professor



Scott Cotton and Jenny Nixon, extension educators based in Chadron and Harrison, respectively, look over maps documenting the extent of the 2006 fires in northwest Nebraska. Extension education is helping producers in the region rebuild and replant, as well as manage forests to help prevent extensive losses in future fires.

Background photo John Overstreet

on needs are ongoing because ‘the fire is coming’

of agricultural and range management, said people looked to extension, noting, “That’s where they go to get the information. They trust the information.”

Workshop topics included health and respiratory issues from the ash-stricken air; replacing livestock fencing; cash flow and financial counseling; relocating displaced cattle; emotional depression; and more.

Virtually all 60 families the Valentine fire affected and 83 of the 110 families the Dawes-Sioux fires affected attended.

Myron and Doris Hebbert have ranched east of Chadron all their lives, and had to sell some of their cattle because fire burned their grazing land.

Extension helped, Myron Hebbert said, adding “every little bit you learn, you’re that much ahead.”

Extension also assisted local residents working with state and federal agencies as they assessed damage and applied for financial assistance or supplies.

Jenkins said fire prevention and control starts with “years of diligence.”

To foster diligence, extension works with

the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS), a part of the university, in teaching a program called Firewise to area residents.

“We are constantly telling people the fire is coming,” said John Overstreet, NFS fire specialist based in Chadron. “There is a constant need to educate. The trend is clear. We’re losing more forest each time there is an outbreak.”

It may take 100 or more years for forests to regrow, he added.

Overstreet flew 30 fire-spotting missions last summer. He spotted nine fires July 24.

“This thing blew up so quickly,” Overstreet said, adding many lifelong residents “had never seen anything close to this.”

Overstreet located hundreds of hot spots during those days, provided daily aerial guidance to ground-fighting crews, and documented the situation with hundreds of photographs for fire chiefs.

Doak Nickerson, NFS district forester in Scottsbluff, was Overstreet’s counterpart in providing support via the NFS Large Fire Protocol. They took copious notes during fire debriefings at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily to de-

termine what resources, such as fire retardant and fire trucks, NFS needed to provide.

Some places have 10-20 times the trees needed for a healthy forest, Nickerson said, adding some landowners who managed their forests had less loss.

NFS and extension teach landowners how to reduce fire risk by thinning trees, mowing grasses and cutting back on encroaching cedar and pine trees, Nickerson said.

Sources say the grass will recover relatively quickly from the effects of “black drought.” Extension will continue providing education such as reseeding rates to prevent erosion, controlling noxious weeds certain to come, addressing post-disaster stress syndrome, and evaluating economic effects to ranchers, county infrastructure and the tourism industry.

“The hard work,” Cotton said, “comes in the next four years.”

— Cheryl Alberts

Cotton can be contacted at (308) 432-3373.

Would you like to treat a friend?

Do you know someone who would like to receive *UNL Extension Connect* who isn’t currently receiving a copy? Please send the name and address to: Editor, *UNL Extension Connect*, P.O. Box 830918, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0918. We’ll do the rest. Thanks.

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Organic production education on the rise

Organic agricultural producers are entering the 21st century with help from University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

Liz Sarno, organic project coordinator based at the UNL Haskell Agricultural Laboratory near Concord, said extension education about organic production includes networking marketing strategies for meat; new publications; grants; and work to come from the recently organic-certified High Plains Agricultural Laboratory near Sidney.

The High Plains fields are the first of four UNL locations to become certified through the Organic Crop Improvement Association International. Certified organic research will occur on the 75 acres of university-managed grain and legume cropland.

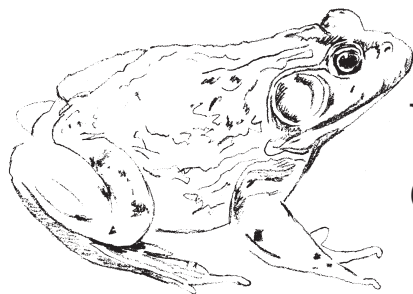
The western Nebraska plot is managed by Drew Lyon, dryland crops specialist based in Scottsbluff. Lyon said organic crops will include those typically having low-input costs in western Nebraska, such as wheat, proso millet, field peas, forage and green manure crops.

Sarno is coordinating farmer and research meetings that identify studies for improving organic production and marketing. Organic production can be more labor intensive than conventional production, she said, but there are higher premiums. That brings opportunities for young people to return to rural Nebraska, or for family operations to expand in a new direction, she added.

Sarno said organic farming is growing rapidly, with several hundred organic producers already in Nebraska. One reason for the increase, she said, is that “people are more in tune to where their foods are coming from.”

— Cheryl Alberts

Sarno can be contacted at (402) 584-3856.



Water activities entice children's learning

Children who otherwise might be sedentary thrive on having fun outdoors while learning about water, thanks to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Project WET (Water Education for Teachers) curriculum.

Brooke Levey, Project WET coordinator, said teachers and others can use the program to help children kindergarten through 12th grades learn more about the natural world outside.

All the materials are provided for teachers, such as Kate Murphy, a retired Omaha Public Schools teacher, now an educator at Fontenelle Nature Association in Omaha and Project WET workshop facilitator.

“Project WET is very hands-on,” Murphy said. “The children get involved in the physical world and they have such a grand and wonderful time.”

In one example, the Incredible Journey activity, children role-play being water molecules and learn how water moves through the natural environment.

Being active helps children learn more and better retain knowledge, Levey said.

“In Nebraska we have so many water qual-

ity and quantity issues that it's important to teach kids to make good decisions and be good stewards of the land,” Levey said.

Workshops are held at K-12 schools, colleges, universities, natural resources districts, nature centers and other venues to teach educators how to teach water education. The program manual makes it easy for teachers and others to detail age-appropriate activities that can be integrated into school curriculum and other settings.

Teachers are “learning to use these materials to teach kids,” Levey said, adding they “don't have to be an expert on water science to teach about water.”

In 2006, 26 daylong workshops were held to teach the Project WET curriculum to teachers and other educators. Of the 527 participants, nearly all said they would use the material to teach about water.

Murphy said children who normally are satisfied to be entertained in front of a television or computer love Project WET and seek to learn more about the natural world. They even take action.

On Earth Day, the knowledge the children gained through Project WET was evident when first-graders took it upon themselves to make signs urging people to reduce water usage, Murphy said.

“They learn to respect natural resources,” Murphy said. “It's an excellent program.”

—Lori McGinnis

Levey can be contacted at (402) 472-1478.



Brett Hampton

Brooke Levey, extension Project WET coordinator, demonstrates a watershed testing kit, which tests water for a variety of substances. Project WET teaches children about water through fun activities.

Extension enrolls hundreds in prescription drug plans

Since University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension has helped Medicare recipients with their prescription drug plan options, many of those recipients find their prescription drug costs slashed by half or more.

Some Medicare recipients say for the first time they are able to purchase all their prescriptions. Some confide in the past they had to choose between their prescriptions and groceries, and now the savings on their prescription costs allow them to buy both.

In Nebraska, extension collaborates with the Nebraska Senior Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP) and AARP Nebraska to educate and enroll beneficiaries in the new Medicare Prescription Drug Program. Earlier, extension provided education for Medicare's transitional prescription drug card program. Now extension provides help for people seeking the right Medicare prescription drug plan.

In 2005-2006, extension educated more than 5,100 caretakers and beneficiaries about the new Medicare Prescription Drug Program. Extension then helped more than 600 Medicare beneficiaries enroll in a carefully reviewed drug plan, collectively saving beneficiaries more than an estimated \$777,000.

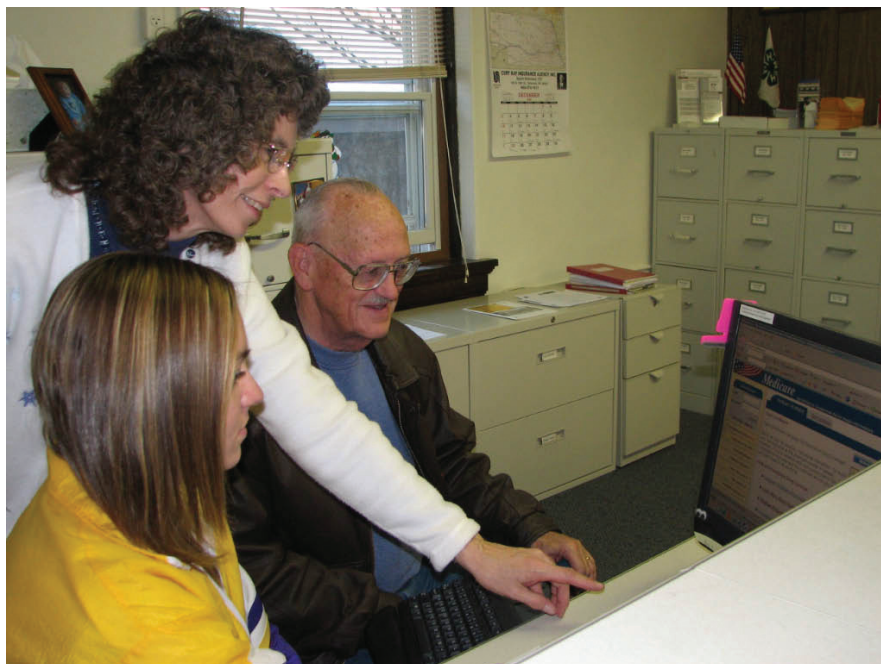
The process, a result of the Medicare Reform Act of 2003, is complex for many people because of the many plan options involved. Adding to the complexity for some, is its Internet-base.

Mary Ann Holland, extension educator based in Weeping Water, worked with a couple in their 90s whose annual drug costs were more than \$7,000. Working through multiple scenario plans with the couple's son, Holland helped find the best prescription option for each parent, reducing their combined annual drug costs to about \$1,800.

Holland is one of 17 Nebraska extension educators helping Medicare recipients explore options regarding their prescription drug plans. All report similar successes, and word is getting around.

"It takes a big load off of us as pharmacists," said Michelle Schmid, pharmacist at Western Drug of Chappell.

Schmid said she initially worked after hours at home to try to figure out the best Medicare prescription drug plan for her customers. Then she discovered extension provides the same service. Schmid now regularly



Extension educator Mary Loftis, center, and Daniell Miller, a junior at Tekamah-Herman High School, assist Clinton Carr of Lyons with exploring Medicare prescription drug plan options.

refers Medicare customers to extension educators such as Carla Mahar, based in Chappell, for prescription drug enrollment questions and updates.

"I've heard nothing but good" coming from the elderly concerning extension's prescription drug assistance, Schmid said. "The people really appreciate it. They're lost and don't know where to go."

After Jeanne Murray, extension educator based in Alliance, explained to the Box Butte Extension Board what she was doing with Medicare prescription drug enrollments, Board President Tricia Schumacher volunteered to help. Schumacher said she did so because she knew "a lot of people who don't have anyone to help them work through the maze."

Schumacher said people trust extension's unbiased education and feel comfortable asking extension personnel questions to figure out the best program for their needs.

Murray said one client told her that since Murray helped the client enroll in a prescription drug program, for the first time that client is able to buy and take all three of her prescriptions at once. Previously her limited income allowed her to buy one medication one week, groceries the second week, a second medication the third week and nothing the fourth week.

Mary Loftis, extension assistant based in Tekamah, enlisted the help of Tekamah-Herman High School computer club members. Students were trained to enter the Medicare recipients' prescription drugs into the Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Finder. Loftis then consulted with the individuals after they saw the plan comparisons and enrolled them into their desired plans.

The senior citizens were "thrilled ... They were so grateful," Loftis said, adding, "I can't go anywhere without people talking Medicare."

Some people are so thankful for extension's help that they want to pay for it, Mahar said, but providing education so people can make informed decisions is extension's job. Extension educators say they are rewarded by being able to make such a difference when it comes to people's health and finances.

She "got back way more than I felt I gave" to the 250 people she was in contact with during the initial Medicare prescription plan enrollment period, Holland said, because of the trust and confidence they placed in her.

"It was simply a joy," Holland said.

— Cheryl Alberts

Holland can be contacted at
(402) 267-2205.

Program helps paraeducators realize their dreams to teach

Paraeducator Bianca Ramirez is learning to become a teacher because she hopes that her Hispanic ethnicity will help Norfolk schoolchildren from other countries hone their abilities in the English language.

Ramirez is one of about 30 in Nebraska taking advantage of a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension program that aims to train Spanish-speaking and minority paraeducators to become teachers.

The Northeast Nebraska Paraeducator Career Ladder program is made available through a nearly \$2 million U.S. Department of Education grant that provides conveniently scheduled classes, and academic and financial support, said Vicky Jones, extended education coordinator at the university's Northeast Research and Extension Center.

The program goal, Jones said, is to more effectively train students whose first language is other than English, and to increase the number of teachers who are bilingual and who have English as a Second Language endorsements.

The minority population in northeast Nebraska has increased 1,000 percent in the last decade, and the families primarily are Hispanic. Yet it has been very difficult for rural school districts to recruit minority teachers.

"Some research suggests having teachers with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds is beneficial to English language learner students," Jones said.

"Nationally speaking, the high school graduation rate of minority students is significantly less than non-minority students, and among minority groups Hispanics have the lowest rate," Jones said.

Nine paraeducators in the program have received associate degrees from Northeast Community College in Norfolk or Central Community College in Columbus. After receiving their associate degrees, the paraeducators take distance education courses through UNL or Wayne State College to obtain bachelor's degrees.

Ramirez, a paraeducator for more than five years at Westside Elementary School in Norfolk, will graduate in December 2007 with her bachelor's degree in education. Once she learned about the career ladder program she

decided to pursue her teaching degree.

"What's exciting about the grant is you actually get to work in a school system while going to school," Ramirez said. "Everything I learn I'm able to use throughout the day."

Paraeducators work in seven participating school districts — Columbus, Columbus Lakeview, Madison, Norfolk, Schuyler, South Sioux City and Wakefield.

The program is open to paraeducators who are minority or bilingual. While Ramirez does not speak Spanish, she hopes that through her Hispanic ethnicity she can relate well to minority students who may need some extra help learning English.

Now in its fifth year, the program is expected to result in more minority students graduating from high school and attending college, Jones said.

The program already has measured success for the paraeducators, she said, by helping increase their skills and confidence on the job, while realizing their dreams to be a teacher.



Mary Jarvi

Bianca Ramirez, left, a paraeducator at Westside Elementary School in Norfolk, shows educational materials to Jan Gannon, her mentor and a kindergarten teacher, and Vicky Jones, extended education coordinator at the university's Northeast Research and Extension Center.

"They may have thought and dreamed about being a teacher but didn't have access to classes scheduled to accommodate working adults," Jones said.

— Lori McGinnis

Jones can be contacted at (402) 370-4003.

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