

# A Farm at Home in the City

Farm director offers youth a second chance through 4-H beef project.

Story and photos by  
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**W**here they have come from is not important to Ronald Meyer. He says his only concern is where they can go from here. And he plans to take them down a path of discipline through showing cattle and instilling a farm work ethic that these youth have never known.

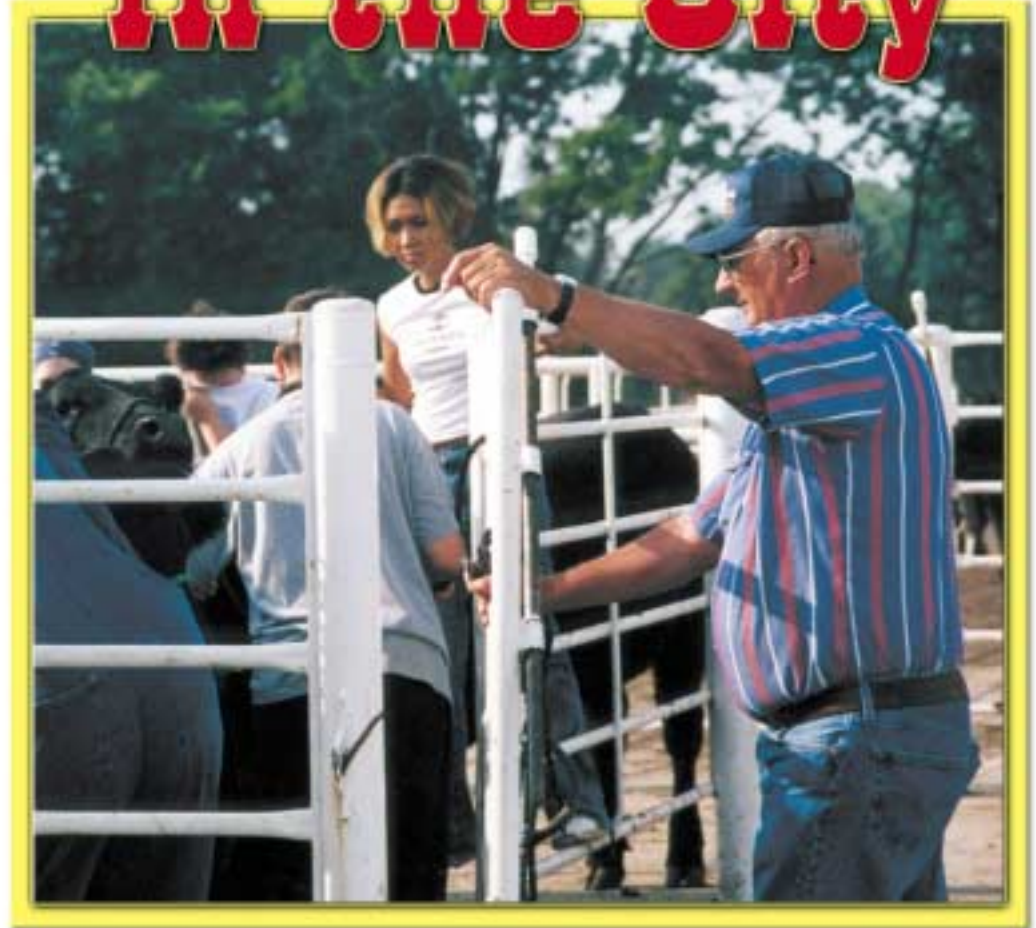
Meyer is the farm director for the Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children. He views his role as that of an educator, but there are no desks, pens or paper in his classroom. He demonstrates life lessons in a showbarn and on a farm while working with youth who have faced adversity, offering them a second chance.

Meyer has spent the last 17 years dedicating his time to youth. His efforts were recognized at the 2002 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), where he was inducted into the Honorary Angus Foundation.

## From city to farm

Many youth at the Home are from the inner city, but they are all part of a farm family that rests in the heart of the quiet town of Fremont, Neb., population 30,000.

"The biggest problem we have in agriculture today is getting the city people to understand our end of the business," Meyer says. "A lot of these kids, and even their parents, live in town, and they have no idea of what it takes to make a T-bone steak or a loaf of bread. They just take it for granted that they go to the



grocery store, pick out what they want and walk out."

Youth who come to the Home assume responsibility for a show animal, whether it is a steer or breeding heifer. Showing cattle comes second to the real-life experiences Meyer exposes them to.

"I like it because it gives me a chance to do things that I never would have done at home," Erin says. "I would never have been involved in 4-H, and it gives me a chance to stay out

of trouble and not hang out with bad influences in my life. It keeps me busy, real busy, during the summer, and I like being able to go to shows."

Erin grew up in Lincoln, Neb., and has been at the Home for four months. She is among 27 other youth who live in four brick cottages on land

adjoining the farm. Each cottage houses eight boys or eight girls.

Alfalfa and brome fields line the short gravel drive to the farm. Each morning

the youth follow the path, greeting the sun as it tops the eastern horizon. They head toward the farm to work with their animals. The youth at the Home rotate farm chores throughout the week.

## A new experience

"Not a lot of people know what working with cattle means," Trina says. "It's fun to have something to do every day instead of just sitting around. You get to meet a lot of people and be at shows."

Although Meyer has children who aren't much older than

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► Above: Ronald Meyer, farm director for the Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children, watches the youth catch their steers for morning chores. Meyer was recognized for his dedication to helping youth at the 2002 National Junior Angus Show in Milwaukee, Wis.

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some of the youth at the Home, many refer to him as "Grandpa." He is someone they can look up to for guidance and advice.

"Ron is like a grandpa to me. He helps you out," Erin says. "I've always done well at the

farm, but then there are other people who haven't, and he always gets on their case."

Meyer's discipline is simple compared to what some parents expect from their children. Lessons don't come from a list of

rules. They are brought to life through expectations of showmanship and responsibilities of caring for livestock.

"You've got to go out there and say, 'Judge, I'm the best.' It's

not just going to come to you," Meyer tells the youth. "It takes a lot of work."

Meyer says most of the youth who come to the Home are pretty tough, but not always for the right reasons. When he takes them to the fairs he expects them to behave properly, and discipline through showmanship has helped many youth cope with troubling times.

"I hear a lot of families and kids say that they aren't going to do showmanship. Well to me, showmanship is *your* skills. Yes, you have to be able to show a good calf properly, but showmanship is a lot more than just that calf," Meyer says. "Showmanship is about your own personality and ability."

The children agree. It's something that many of them focus on. Meyer's philosophy seems simple — to offer each youth opportunities that they wouldn't get anywhere else.

Meyer says he sympathizes with a youth who has worked hard but has a lower-quality animal. "You know in your own heart, before they go to the fair, they are not going to be able to come home with a very good ribbon," he says. "That is the reason why I push showmanship here so hard." Showmanship provides youth who may not have the best animal, but who have worked with their calves to the best of their ability, the opportunity to come home with a better ribbon.

### Beyond the ring

Meyer doesn't leave the youth with experience only in the showing. They learn about the cattle — from the breeding aspect to how to give vaccinations to keep the animals healthy. The youth have the opportunity to care for their animals and to make a solid bond with an animal, something many of them have never experienced.

"You know, probably everyone

### Teaching down on the farm



► Youth at the Masonic-Eastern Star Home for Children learn discipline and respect through working with 4-H livestock projects. Ronald Meyer, the Home's farm director, uses real-life experiences of showing animals as the basis of his program.



► Meyer says showmanship allows youth to acknowledge their own talents and abilities through working with their animals on a daily basis. Youth at the Home are responsible for feeding and care of the livestock.



has developed a bond with an animal at one time or another — for most people it would probably be a cat or a dog. For obvious reasons we can't have 30 cats here and 30 dogs," Meyer says. "These youngsters have their calf, and they feel like it's their own calf, and they develop a bond with that animal. It's tough on them when they sell that calf, but we instill in their minds that that is what we are raising livestock for in the United States."

The youth must learn to separate themselves from their animals eventually. Still, Meyer tries to fill the lots before too long. "It doesn't take them too long to forget their old calf and pick out another one," he adds.

The Home is funded through private donations. Children from across the nation are accepted no matter what their ethnic background or religion may be, Meyer says. The farm's show animals also travel from registered herds across the nation. Many times the animal is on loan, but steers and heifers have also been given to the program. The farm has its own herd of 10 Angus cows, as well.

Even though 4-H animals play a large role in the Home's program, Meyer says it is more than just the farm that counts in these youths' lives.

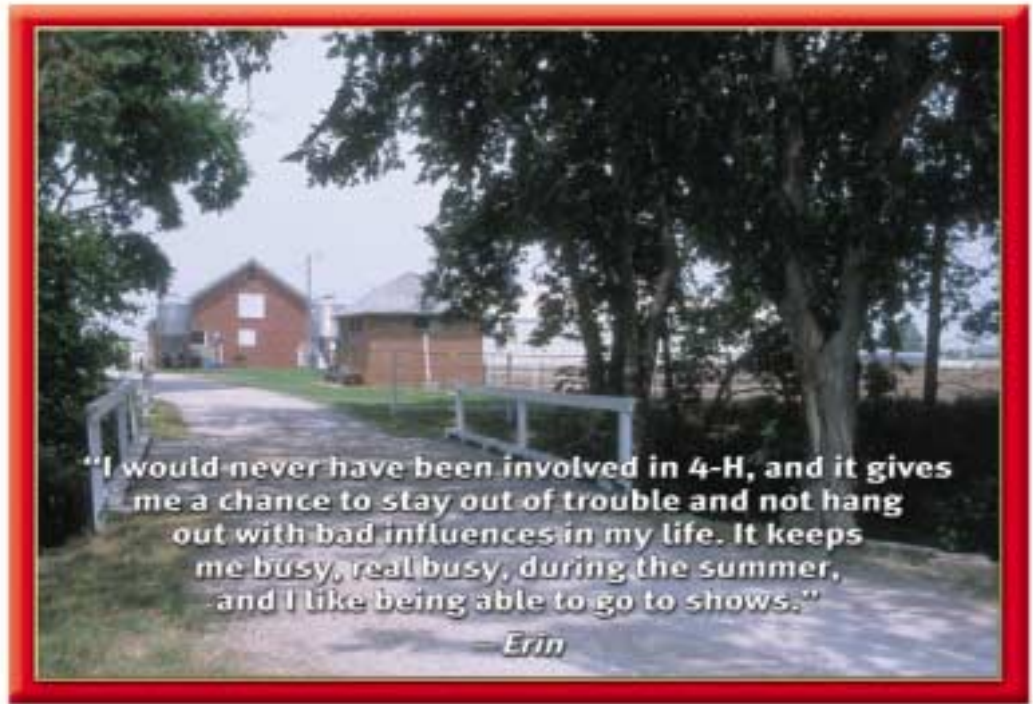
Houseparents who work with the children on other projects, schoolwork and household chores are an important part of the team effort.

Meyer acknowledges they are key to the success of the program.

"What we've done has not just been me," Meyer says. "It's through the cooperation of everyone."

### Family activity

The 4-H program involves more than just Meyer himself. He says it's really a family thing. "Instead of being a family of two, we are a family of 30."



His wife, Carla, is a 4-H leader and has worked with the youth on other 4-H projects. His daughter, Kyla, is a member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA). His son, David, travels across the nation fixing and welding shopping carts. Meyer admits that maybe his own children have missed out on a few extra opportunities because of his responsibilities to the Home's children.

"The hardest thing is dividing time between my own children and children at the Home," Meyer says.

He also has never been able to give up having

his own livestock. It's a matter of having it in your blood. Either you love it, or you hate it, he says. He has chosen to love it, and he and his family care for 75 registered Angus cows along with the Home's animals.

"When you farm or ranch, there are livestock to be taken care of every morning and every night. Some people look forward to that, and some people don't," he says.

He looks forward each day to helping children overcome some of the challenges they face.

"He's gotten me through a lot of hardships since I moved to the house. He

gives advice, and he has you constantly working so your mind doesn't go onto things it shouldn't," says Shanon, who has been at the Home for two years.

Their histories may be filled with wrong choices and disappointments, but at the farm and through Meyer's guidance, pasts can be put behind them, shedding a new light on their futures.

"It's about as good a self-esteem builder as there is. I think also you learn to accept defeat," Meyer adds. "There can only be one winner, and not everyone can win. For some people losing is harder than for the other person, but it doesn't hurt anybody to lose. You learn to accept that and go on down the road."

But there is more to Meyer's role than educating youth about agriculture. He, along with the houseparents and staff at the Home, have offered these youth something that they might never have received had they not been placed there — a second chance.

Meyer says, "Just because you lost, don't think you can't start over and try again."

