

Military OneSource Podcast — How 4-H Empowers Military-Connected Youth

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Hi, I am Bruce Moody, and today I'm joined by Vanessa Tranel. She's with 4H, been with them for 25 years. Her passion for helping kids find their spark shines through in every story that she shares. And today she's pulling back the curtain on what makes 4H such a transformative experience for military family.

This episode was originally planned for National 4H Week, but that was in October. So, we are posting this one later than expected, but the message is still just as powerful. This is more than just an overview. It's an invitation. You're going to come away with a clear picture of what 4H is, why it matters, and how to get your child involved.

Before we get started, I want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military. For the military, we are your first line of support giving warfighters and their families tools they need to stay well and thrive. You can visit our website or call us anytime. We've got our phone number and the website in the program notes along with a link that you can use to send us your questions, your comments or ideas for a future episode. We'd love to hear from you. And a reminder you can subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen, so please do. Okay. Let's jump into today's conversation. Vanessa Tranel, welcome to the podcast.

Vanessa Tranel:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

You are with 4H, so what was your life journey? How did you end up in 4H?

Vanessa Tranel:

Honestly, Bruce, I can't remember a time when I wasn't involved in the 4H program. I was a third generation 4H and grew up on a dairy farm in Colorado, and my father had been in 4H and my grandfather was an original 4H member in Colorado in the early 1900s. So, for our family, it was just what we did. It was our recreation. It was a part of our family's professional income. It was how we learned, it was how we grew. It was how we traveled. Those were the only vacations I took as a young person was getting to go on 4H trips for the most part, because as glamorous as living on a dairy farm is, you don't leave home very often.

Bruce Moody:

This is great. You and I had, let's call it very different childhood, so this is very cool. I'm really excited to learn. So, let's just kind of start at the start here. What does 4H stand for?

Vanessa Tranel:

The 4Hs in the 4H Positive Youth Development Program stand for Head, heart, health and Hands.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, very nice.

Vanessa Tranel:

It's the largest youth development organization in the United States, and every year it reaches over six million around the country and around the world. And 4H is a program of the Cooperative Extension System, which is supported by the United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture and our nation's land grant, universities and local communities.

That's part of why it's also such a great fit and the connection back with our military service members and military connected youth nearly any place. In the United States that a family would move, there is an extension office through the Land Grant University or universities of that state that leads and conducts the 4H program.

So, if you are in a rural area and you're a [National] Guard and reserve member, you can find your local extension office if you're in an urban area or a suburban area, you will still have a local extension office. 4H has actually been around since 1902 and what began as farming clubs for boys and canning clubs for girls has really advanced and progressed as anything should, if it's going to remain sustainable right in over a hundred years, but I would definitely say that what began in 1902 as farming clubs for boys and canning clubs for girls is more applicable today than ever because 4H has still focused on positive youth development and teaching skills to young people and giving them places to belong and to have fun and to develop all those things they need in life.

Bruce Moody:

Very nice. We're going to get really into more and more about what the 4H is all about as we have this conversation. How did the 4H sort of merge with the military? Because you find 4H really through the teen and the youth centers, and we'll get to that too, but how did that partnership begin?

Vanessa Tranel:

The 4H military partnership has been around for a really long time, over 30 years. In the beginning, the Army actually was the first one of the military services to partner with 4H. They were looking at programming that would help develop resiliency in their young people as they moved from place to place as frequently as they did.

And they also were really looking for something to create a sense of belonging for the young people. So, for instance, if my family lived in Texas, and my parent was a military service member in the army. And they moved to Virginia or California or Colorado or even overseas. The parents have so many things going on.

They're planning to move and getting prepared to ship goods and find new jobs and get acclimated in their new military position. And so the Army in particular really wanted something where a person could go if they belonged to the school age program, they could walk into the school age program after school the first day and see a big 4H clover on the wall and see that there were either 4H projects or activities happening or there were 4H clubs happening and that could be a little sense of relief to say, "Oh, I know that I've done that." So even though 4H looks a little bit different from state to state, because our programs tend to meet the needs of our citizens and be a little bit unique from state to state, those kinds of things are still the same.

That 4H clover, that sense of belonging, the life skills the young people develop. And so that was probably one of the biggest components of the original partnership with the Army. The other piece was to do professional development for child and youth staff within the military services because there are child and youth programs all over the world with our service partners that care for military-connected children and youth.

They really saw 4H as a terrific partner because of our positive youth development background. All of our 4H professionals around the country have backgrounds in youth development and in education and have that sense of connectivity where it was really, really a good fit. So, a big part of what we also do through the 4H program is professional development and staff training to equip our child and youth program staff at military installations around the world to conduct 4H clubs and projects and activities within their out-of-school time programs.

Bruce Moody:

Just to really make that point for people who are specifically saying, how do I connect with the 4H? The way to do that is to go into your youth center, your teen center and not just because they know who to call, but because from what you're describing, the 4H is really woven into the military community through the youth and the teen centers. Do I have that right?

Vanessa Tranel:

Yes. If your family would like to get your children and teens involved in the 4H program, that's the first place to stop. If your child goes to a school-age program, ask the school-age program, and if they belong to a youth center, ask the youth center program the other way that for each connects with military people around the country and around the world are through the National Guard and reserve programs. So, if there are [National] Guard and reserve families in communities that are interested in knowing more about 4H and signing your youth up for 4H, your easiest connection is. To look up online, the 4H program in whatever particular county you live in, and you will find the point of contact for that 4H program.

And then you are welcome and encouraged to get involved in that program, which is typically a community club program. So, if you're not living anywhere near an active-duty installation, there are still options for [National] Guard and reserve families.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about some of the specific things that military-connected youth. We don't like to use the term military youth because they're not in the military, but they're military-connected youth and they're experiencing military life. You know, they're moving and their parents are deploying or parent is deploying and all that other stuff. So, how is the 4H helping youth and families when they're dealing with military life and all that it has to offer?

Vanessa Tranel:

A big part of how 4H helps military connected children and youth as they are dealing with all of the challenges that they get to deal with as a young person, is that they're busy developing life skills. When they participate in 4H, they're having fun, but they also feel like they belong.

They're connecting and they're making friends. They're learning. Getting to be with people. In many cases, if they're participating at an active-duty installation program, they're getting to be with other young people that have so many things in common with them. If they're connecting with young people outside the gate in the 4H program that aren't from a military family, they're also getting that sense of connectivity just a little bit different so that our 4H.

Young people outside the gates are learning more about the military lifestyle, but they're fitting in because a young person is, a young person, is a young person no matter where they live in the world. And I always say that about 4H too. 4H is 4H is 4H. There may be a state where 4H prioritizes or fits really well into the school system, and so they go in and they're a part of a school day, and then there are lots of states where 4H is an extracurricular activity that's a part of a community and it's led by volunteers, but it really doesn't matter. That's the beauty of the 4H military partnership is that when.

A young person is involved in 4H, they're still gaining all of the same skills. They're gaining life skills. They're learning how to be independent. They're learning how to master skills, whether it be cooking or rocketry or dog obedience or archery. No matter what it is, they're learning that skill, but they're learning all of the life skills that go right along with it.

Bruce Moody:

It's funny that you mentioned rocketry, which is a long way from, well, dairy farming. Yes. So, how is the 4H working with some of these new and emerging issues?

Vanessa Tranel:

That is such a great question because it's really on the top of our list right now. It's very important for 4H around the country to support all of our military partners with whatever their needs are in positive youth development and program needs.

Right now, two of the new and emerging needs through the services are sports, fitness and health, because they tie back to the president's new executive order on reinstituting the presidential physical fitness test. So, the way that one ties back is 4H has a number of

pieces of curriculum and program that we can either help support the installations or we can provide training and provide those resources to the staff at military installations, and we have programs called Health Rocks.

There's something called Youth Advocates for Health. We have sports and nutrition curriculum. We have a curriculum called Keeping Fit and Healthy; something called Steps to a Healthy Teen. We also have plenty of mental health curriculum in addition to our food, fitness and physical health curriculum. And after all, 4H is still our fourth H.

Our research also shows that 4Hers are about two times more likely to make healthier choices, which is a really neat thing to remind our service partners of when we're sharing our 4H resources. The other one we are really highlighting right now for the services is the 4H benefit to homeschool groups, homeschool youth and homeschool families.

It's always been such a perfect fit. I used to work in Eastern Colorado. A very long time ago we had a number of homeschool families and they would get together every once in a while, to do things and have practice, some communications, some just being together, and they approached 4H and said, "Is there something that we can do in partnership?"

And it's just always been great. We can help supplement some of the things that the young people, when they're a smaller group.

Bruce Moody:

Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Tranel:

At home being homeschooled might not get things like public speaking or communication skills, teamwork and team building for each in a number of states provides a variety of age-appropriate competitions.

Going back to the networking and connecting with other young people and the community for each also is a very strong proponent of our young people learning how to give back. So, we place a heavy focus on civic engagement and community service as well as volunteerism. But to answer the original part of your question is if we know that there are needs of the services, and those come in different ways, sometimes it might be just one service or even one installation that contacts their local 4H professional and says we may need some help with bullying or our young people want to raise a guard, and we don't have a clue of where to start. Or we want to teach our young people how to do a community service project so that we can adopt a nursing home. So those are the kinds of needs that we look for also, just by staying in touch.

And communicating and having that relationship and connecting back with our military partners. That's how we learn what the needs are, and then we can figure out if it's curriculum or if it's a program or if maybe it's a camp like military teen adventure camp. So, it just takes a lot of communication — getting to know one another, learning what one another's needs are and asking what the emerging needs are.

Bruce Moody:

Incidentally, for those who don't know when it comes to homeschooling, the military population homeschoools at twice the rate of the general U.S. population. So, it's a

significant population that is getting support from organizations such as 4H. So National 4H Week is in October, which is why we're doing this interview.

And you have a theme called Beyond Ready, and I'd like for you to talk about that theme in terms of what it means and how it relates to our military-connected youth.

Vanessa Tranel:

So our mission with the Beyond Ready Initiative in general is to reach 10 million young people with the skills of resilience and confidence and other things that they need to thrive, but some of the statistics that really, really hit at home are, we know that 53% of Gen Zs report feeling lonely. 52% feel that they're failing at life goals. And 77% of employers focus less on traditional school subjects, but more on real world skills. So that's really a wakeup call for all of us in the youth development business to say.

It's our job to support families, to support school systems, to support homeschool families, to support education of young people in general. To help them to develop these skills.

Bruce Moody:

Are there any special activities or events taking place for a National 4H Week that we should know about?

Vanessa Tranel:

There are. National 4H Week occurs the first full week in October every year, and it's an awesome opportunity to celebrate the work and the accomplishments of 4H members to thank our volunteers and our community members. It's just a great time of celebration. So this year, national 4H Week is October 5-11 and some of the special things that we're doing are on October 6, that is Go Green Day, and that allows everyone to wear anything green, a green T-shirt, a green hat, green pins; whatever it might be.

They can put up green signs; they can serve green snacks at a military connected youth program. Anything to celebrate 4H and be green. October 8 is a special event again for us. This year, the 4H Military Partnership is hosting a virtual National 4H meeting. We'll be doing a fun STEM project.

The families that join us will be able to learn a little bit more about 4H and to meet others from around the world. The meeting will actually be repeated two times an identical meeting. The first is from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. EST, and the second time will be 8:30 to 9:30 p.m. EST.

The meeting is free and is open to any military connected family, but families must register in order to get the Zoom link. And once they register, we'll be able to send them the little supply list to do our STEM project, which is this year going to also be hosted by a 4H Club member from one of our military installations.

And then lastly, on October 9, that day is called 4H for Good, and that is a day where 4H members and organizations and groups can do some sort of community service or else they can just share about community service that they've done in the past. It's an excuse or a reason to celebrate how much 4H members give back to their communities.

They can announce and share those things on social media and just acknowledge those young people and in general National 4H Week is an opportunity for 4H members and leaders to recruit new parent volunteers or maybe grandparents. If there's someone that you know has a special skill, it's an opportunity that you could invite them in to do something with the young people and see if they like it and share that skill.

They can decorate youth centers. They can decorate the school age program. They can feature 4H members. They can put up special pictures; they can do a social media campaign. National 4H Week is kind of like our spirit week that we have every year.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. We've got links in the program notes so people can read more about these events or of course, and correct me if I'm wrong, but you can just contact your local youth center, teen center to find out what's happening.

So, Vanessa, as we are getting ready to record this interview, you mentioned that you had six factoids about 4H that you wanted to include in our conversation. So, this is your cue.

Vanessa Tranel:

So we are really proud of the long history that we have with 4H and how we continue to be sustainable. And over the years, 4H has conducted multiple research studies to determine the effectiveness of our program.

And our data shows that compared to their peers, 4Hers are two times more likely to have the goal of being a leader, three times more likely to participate in community service, two times more likely to report living with intentionality and purpose. Four times more likely to give back to their communities, two times more likely to make healthier choices and two times more likely to participate in STEM activities.

Bruce Moody:

The 4H seems to have a real philosophy with regard to dealing with the growth trajectory of youth and to address a lot of the issues that a youth might encounter through a sort of learning by doing approach. I think that's what I'm getting from you by learning a task, by developing something with other people, by choosing the right task, there's a lot that can be learned, and I'd like for you to kind of walk us through how maybe a hands-on project, maybe woodworking, for example, is going to teach life skills to our military-connected youth.

Vanessa Tranel:

So as I mentioned earlier, our 4H slogan is learning by doing. And our premise has always been to teach young people skills by doing things and learning them as they go.

We know that you can learn a certain amount of things if you read it. You can learn a certain amount of things if you hear it, if you're listening to a lecture or whatever it is, but we know from research that the largest number of skills are from actually doing something and experiencing it. So, we talk a lot in 4H about experiential learning, which has to do with experiencing something and then processing whatever that thing is that you've experienced and then generalizing it, so it applies to a real-life situation. So, an example like

woodworking would be, so a young person is going to do the 4H woodworking project. So, they're going to look at what's age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate for them.

And they're going to have from their 4H person in the community or from their installation, they'll have a list of things that they can perhaps make or things that they can use the appropriate tools to use or whatever that might be. So, the first thing, they get to be creative because they get to think about what they want to make.

This is going to be their project. They can make it for themselves, they can make it for somebody else, but they get to think creatively in what. They're going to make, and then they start to learn some problem solving and some critical thinking skills because you have to plan, you have to get all the supplies, which means you also have to have some financial skills because if you're doing it.

At home or if you're doing it as a part of a military program, you may have a certain amount of supplies or that staff member may have a certain amount of funds that they can allocate to those supplies. So, there's some financial stuff that comes into that. They're also learning to set goals and plan.

How are they going to go about it? What do you do first? How long is it going to take? How long do I have? What do I want it to look like? If it's a big project? Oh my gosh. One of the projects for many years that's been popular. In a number of states are making beds, bed frames, big, beautiful bed frames.

Well, that's a little bit bigger of a project than making a bookshelf or something that you can use in your program or a candle holder that would be a gift for someone. So that's part of the planning. They have to learn details and think about, okay, if I'm going to measure this, that old saying, remember the measure twice, cut once kind of thing.

Because once you've cut that big, beautiful piece of lumber in half, you don't really get a second chance to glue it back together most of the time. However, going back to creativity, they may have to figure out how to glue it back together. But making mistakes like that can. Lead to structural problems, wasted materials or they're just being disengaged once.

Sometimes if you've made something and it hasn't turned out perfectly, it can be a little bit disheartening, although a life skill is still to learn how to work your way through it. I guess just going back to a woodworking project. It's so much more than whatever that project is. It's all of those skills that come into play as they're designing and making that woodworking, getting help from whoever their adult is, whether it's a volunteer or a staff member, the safety, all the things they need to do, and then getting to be proud of it at the end.

That's one of the things that 4H always reminds parents and staff members and our professionals is, it's so important to have that celebration at the end. Even if the project didn't turn out perfectly, the young person did it so they can have the confidence that if they do it again, it may turn out a little bit differently or they may have learned some really valuable things because it may not be exactly like they wanted, but they can still be proud that they did it.

Bruce Moody:

You know, this is really interesting because you're referencing all the various steps of a project by talking about all the emotions that the youths are experiencing at each of the steps. Can you share any stories of what you see when young people are working through the steps of a project?

Vanessa Tranel:

Yes. One of the examples I can remember quite fondly was building little race cars at one of the military installations because NASCAR had been happening, some kind of car races.

And so, the staff member was trying to tie it back to something in the community or something that the young people had seen on TV, and so she worked with the woodworking teacher. The young people made little race cars, and they worked on them for week after week after week, and they got to design their own car.

They got to build their own car, then they got to furnish their own car. They could put little people in it or they could color it or do whatever it was. And then their culminating event was, they had a race, actually, it was a series of races, and they got to race all of their little cars. Came down to the winner and the winner actually got a trophy that they could drink milk out of like they do for NASCAR races.

But, so, just seeing the emotions of the young people as they go up and down. Because sometimes it depends. You may have had a really hard day at school. And if you come to the program and you're working on something and it doesn't go together like you want it to go together, it can be really hard. And so that's where the young people have to kind of learn with whoever their adult mentor is to maybe take a step back and take some breaths.

Talk a little bit about the stress of the day and how that sounds like it's coming out at whatever they're doing, learning to manage their feelings a little bit at the same time. Oh, my goodness. When you see the young people working on their projects and it's time to go, because it's the end of the day and their parents come and they don't want to leave because they don't want to finish or don't want to quit working on their project, they want to finish what they're doing that.

Really warms your heart because you see how much fun they're having and how much they're engaged and what that's doing for their self-esteem and for their feelings.

Bruce Moody:

And that gets into what the 4H calls finding their spark, right?

Vanessa Tranel:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

What does that mean for the 4H for young people?

Vanessa Tranel:

Yes. So, in 4H we talk a lot about finding your spark, and that is about a young person.

Trying lots of different things and finding something that they really enjoy doing. It's something that will help a young person, maybe even get out of bed every day to go to school because maybe school is not the favorite part of their day, but if they go to school and they get to come home and bake or they get to go to their program after school and work on a rocketry project or a photography project or a cake decorating project. That's enough to get them through the day so that they can do that. But it's also about finding that

spark within and what is it that they really like to do, and maybe what are they prone to do someday as a career.

We've had a number of young people as an example of finding their spark that have started the 4H cake decorating project when they were eight and nine years old and by the time they get to high school, they wind up decorating cakes for families and friends and neighbors, and they're earning a little bit of money on the side.

And then it's almost time to go off to college or to do something else. And they go to work at a bakery, at a grocery store or someplace and are decorating cakes to have more financial income. And then we have a number of 4Hs that have started their own bakeries and cake decorating shops because. I feel it's because they started at in 4H when they were young.

And so that's an example of a passion, finding your spark, finding your passion in life, whatever it might be. It might be animals, it might be guarding, and it might be cake decorating, but finding what really keeps you motivated and what you really enjoy doing.

Bruce Moody:

This is wonderful. I appreciate this conversation, Vanessa, and your perspective on ultimately what we do, which is, you know, we're the military and so we have warfighters in uniform trying to focus on their jobs. From your perspective, from what you see in the kids and especially with the parents, what is the 4H and the youth and the teen center doing to allow people in uniform to focus on their mission?

Vanessa Tranel:

When a military service member's children and teens are at a program where they're being taken care of, where they're in a safe place where they're having fun, they're connecting and making friends where they're learning, where they're doing really cool stuff. That all helps enable the service member to focus on their job and whatever they're doing.

Anytime you have something, take the focus away from your job, you're not able to devote a hundred percent to that. And the military services work so hard to care for the children and youth of their service members, and I think 4H is really an integral part of a lot of that programming at a lot of places around the country.

Bruce Moody:

Alright, so we're going to end it there. Thank you, Vanessa Tranel, thank you so much for joining us today.

Vanessa Tranel:

Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure to talk about the 4H program and our 4H military partnership.

Bruce Moody:

I can really get your passion for what you do. It really comes out, so I really appreciate it and please come back to the podcast.

Vanessa Tranel:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

You're very welcome. Wonderful. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military. For the military, we are your first line of support, giving warfighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. Call us anytime. Visit us anytime. We've got our number and the website address in the program notes. There's also a link you can use to send us your questions or comments, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.