

Overcoming Challenges

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Submitted by Carla Nemecek, Southwind Extension District Director

This is not the article I would have predicted to write a few months ago, and certainly not my usual educational column. However, like many others, COVID-19 has me feeling off-balance as I navigate my work and family responsibilities while following orders and staying at home.

Let me start with the most popular question we receive – Will there be a County Fair in July? Currently, K-State Research & Extension will not organize or participate in any face-to-face events or activities through July 4, 2020 due to the pandemic. Unfortunately, that means we will not host our annual 4-H Day Camp, area judging contests or attend Rock Springs 4-H Camp in June. However, after hearing the Governor's plan last week we are feeling more optimistic we will be able to have traditional County Fairs as scheduled! We are hoping for the best, but also planning for the worst as we research online platforms that will allow us to host educational showcase events for our 4-H youth to share their projects and receive feedback from judges. Whether we are allowed to have our county fairs in person or remotely, the Southwind Extension District Agents are already working with our County Fair Boards to be sure the county fair will go on because we know how important they are to our kids and communities.

In January, I really began to notice how Extension needed to shift our programming efforts from entirely face-to-face to exploring remote and virtual alternatives to reach more diverse audiences. That was never more obvious than when COVID-19 forced us into a remote environment. For the past 7 weeks, your Extension Agents, 4-H Program Assistant and Office Professionals have relocated their work spaces to homes, pastures, porches and crop fields, and have proven we can educate in a virtual environment – something we didn't even know we could do! All eight Extension Agents and the 4-H Program Assistant have put themselves out there for the world to watch us offer advice and explain why research-based information is important to your lives and livelihood. Personally speaking, my first live was as uncomfortable as my very first 4-H project talk, but then I saw the positive feedback and expanded audience that I was able to connect with and understood the value of an authentic video.

Meal planning, family & financial management tips, and fun family activities from home have all been shared through Facebook live, YouTube and on our Instagram page. We submitted a public request to complete an online state-wide Extension needs assessment survey and you all responded with 20% of the state wide results coming from Allen, Neosho, Bourbon and Woodson Counties – thank you! It is obvious you value K-State Research & Extension and we will not disappoint you with our efforts.

You might be surprised to know that many of our traditional Extension services are still accessible to you. Horticulture consultations, soil testing, and pond management assistance continue to be priorities for us, and we are only a phone call away on our usual office numbers that are now being forwarded to Office Professionals. 4-H youth have been able to continue monthly meetings through Zoom coordination and some have found creative ways to help with project meetings remotely.

This pandemic has been hard on all of us, and everyone has had a different reaction to the day by day changes and announcements that come from state government, local officials or employers. As we navigate the coming weeks of reopening, the Southwind Extension District will make every effort to be the trusted, go-to resource for research-based information you have come to expect in Southeast Kansas. For more information, you can reach us at www.southwind.ksu.edu.