Meet 4-H Youth Development Specialist Ernie Lopez

Sussex County residents with connections to the University of Delaware are likely to be familiar with the name of Ernie Lopez. He has worked at the main campus in Newark for seven and a half years as an admissions counselor and, since 2003, as an Associate Dean of Admissions. During that time, Lopez forged close relationships with teens and parents as he recruited Delaware students from Kent and Sussex counties and chaired a committee that reviewed all Delaware student applications. His positive attitude, avocation for students with sound advice and relationship skills were talents that did not go unnoticed by the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

When elected to the Cooperative Extension arm of the University approached Lopez to consider an extension specialist position with Delaware’s 4-H Youth Development. Lopez jumped at the chance for a new approach in education by working more closely with university-based education. Lopez had always recognized the well-rounded college applicants who listed 4-H on their resume.

“I saw a balance I wanted to see in applicants,” Lopez said of college-bound 4-H youth. “Their involvement with the program makes the young person’s application very special. You know they are bringing something else to the table.”

So, as a 4-H Program Leader Judy Sparks had heard a lot about Lopez. “I had heard how helpful he had been… I heard this over and over again, that Ernie was one of the most positive individuals you will ever meet. On the worst day, everything is Relocating to Sussex County’s new extension office at the Elbert N. and Ann V. Carvel’s Research and Education Center in Georgetown sealed the deal – providing Lopez with opportunity to live close to his parents and in-laws who live in Sussex County. And in July 2006, Lopez began a new phase of his University career at the Delaware State Fair’s 4-H Building. It was, as Lopez put it, “baptism by fire.”

It was quite an indoctrination – never-the-less, Lopez hit the slopes running and absorbed the bounty of 4-H he saw on display. “The Fair was like a big buffet,” Lopez said. “I got to experience the diversity of the projects and see fruits of their labor.”

Sparks agrees. “It was a great opportunity to meet so many people in informal situations and see so many young people engaged in 4-H activities,” she said.

Lopez presents a fresh, modern face to 4-H’s rich, 106-year-old extension as the nation’s largest youth program. As a community of youth, people across America who develop leadership, citizenship and life skills for youth ages 5-19, the program boasts more than 300 curriculum areas or “projects” from which a youth member or adult volunteer leader can select to concentrate on. Project areas range from performing and graphic arts, to science, engineering and technology. In between are the multitude of traditional agricultural disciplines, facilitated by Cooperative Extension, that first earned 4-H its recognition and excellent reputation; livestock, ecology, wildlife, foods and nutrition, clothing and textiles, crops, entomology and horticulture.

This July serves as Lopez’s second summer with extension. He considers the organization the jewel of the University, and regards his colleagues as, “the smartest people out there — on the front lines, delivering university knowledge and research that really resonates with the community.”

Mark Isaac, director of the Carvel Research and Education Center feels equally proud of Lopez. “Ernie has been an excellent addition to our 4-H Team. During his first two years in extension, Ernie’s team work attitude has been instrumental in expanding our 4-H initiatives in Sussex County,” Isaac said. “His engaging personality and excellent communication skills, along with his tremendous commitment to youth leadership and development, have also allowed Ernie to strengthen 4-H programs across the state.”

Lopez’s mission to strengthen 4-H focuses on three target areas: building youth leadership, providing adult volunteer recruitment and training, and establishing the 4-H brand across Delaware.

He holds regular meetings with 4-H adult leaders across the state – and recently conducted his second State 4-H Teen Conference – a weekend experience in Newark that concentrates on leadership skills through workshop sessions, free exchange of ideas, and interactions with guest speakers. Their enthusiasm doesn’t end at these events. Young 4-H adults often stop by unannounced, in between college classes – or just because they are in the area – to chat and share more ideas. Lopez sees a “generous attitude in them. They never say or imply, “it’s about me,” he admires. “It’s always about doing something good for someone else.”

Lopez wants to capitalize on his treasure trove of good will and use it to involve key supporters in the community. As with any profit, non-profit organization, support from local businesses, government and community leaders is a necessary and valued resource. “But it is more than asking for a check,” Lopez said. Small, tangible ways to connect the community with 4-H are highly valued. Preparing for two weeks of state 4-H camp is a good example. “Whether a local business donates firewood for campfires, or when Allen’s Family Foods donates chicken for campers’ dinners, every level of support is deeply appreciated.” Lopez is quick to emphasize that give-and-take is necessary to build and sustain community relationships.

“4-H’ers are naturals working with adults,” Lopez said. “I want to hear from the community, what can we do for you? What event are you having, what areas can we be helpful – where could you use our talented pool of youth?”

Another resource of talent is the adult volunteer, known as leaders. Leaders are the engine of the program – an enormous reservoir of talent that comes from community adults – business leaders, educators and parents with special skills to share, Lopez said. “It is my role to support them.”

Part of that support comes from parental requests to execute background screenings of direct volunteers. According to Judy Sparks, certain procedures were already in place, including a volunteer application and interview process – but the need to push it up a level was a necessary one.

“In a non-threatening way, Ernie led Delaware 4-H on a process in which all volunteers were screened over a six month period,” Sparks said. “He diligently worked with county staff and attended local leader meetings to share information and make the process painless.”

As a result of that effort, all volunteers who work directly with children have criminal background screenings. “Nowadays, there is no excuse not to do this,” Lopez explains. “In order to sustain our programs, we must keep our house in order and it gives us more validity in the eyes of the community.”

Lopez can relate to the concerns and responsibilities of parenthood. He and his wife, the former Janis Drake of Rehoboth, reside in Lewes and are the proud parents of two young daughters, Anna Christine, 2, and Claire Elizabeth, 2 months.

Lopez looks forward to teaching his daughters the meaning behind the 4-H’ers and the significance of the clover emblem. As soon as Anna and Claire reach the Clover-but age of 5 years – they will begin learning and practicing the 4-H pledge:

“I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my Heart for greater loyalty, my Hands for larger service and my Health to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world!”