

Benson helps builds future skills in FFA



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Debbie Benson, center, who teaches ag education at King City High School, chats Thursday at Growers Street Cooling in Salinas during ag education day.

Group is involved in community

By JANICE AUSTIN
For The Salinas Californian

A former FFA student herself, Debbie Benson says she knew early on she wanted to work with the program in her adult life.

She certainly got her wish. Benson is now in her 26th year as an FFA adviser at King City High School, where she teaches agriculture.

She grew up in Hanford in the San Joaquin Valley and came to south county to teach. Her marriage to a local man kept her here.

"Having been very involved in FFA while I was in high school, it was what I wanted to do," she said. "Knowing the skills that it taught me, I wanted to share that. FFA gave me direction in my life that I didn't have. I see that happen to lot of my students, and it makes it all worthwhile."

As an FFA adviser, Benson's

responsibilities include taking the group's officers to training sessions, coordinating activities with them, coaching a judging team, and taking care of live-stock and crop projects.

"We are quite varied," she said. "We do care packages for the military and coordinate a canned food drive with elementary and middle schools for the holidays."

Benson said her FFA group also is highly involved in the King City Christmas parade and with the student body for homecoming and other student events.

"We have a variety of leadership-competition teams" in FFA, she said. "We've just finished our opening- and closing-ceremonies contest. We have both prepared public speakers and extemporaneous public speakers. We have kids who compete in a job-interview competition, and we're also involved in a cooperative-marketing competition. I coach a vegetable-judging team which has been very successful throughout the state in previous years."

DEBBIE BENSON

■ **AGE:** 48

■ **YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:** King City FFA

■ **WORK:** teacher at King City High School

■ **EDUCATION:** associate's degree from College of the Sequoias, bachelor's degree in dairy science and master's degree in agriculture and teaching credential 1980 from Cal-Poly.

■ **PERSONAL:** Lives in King City with husband Richard; three children, Nathan, 21, who attends college in Hawaii; Bryant, 20, who attends school college in Florida; and Dustin, 17, a senior at King City High School.

■ **INFORMATION:** For more information about South County FFA, contact King City High School at 385-5461.

Benson said the group is trying new ideas for fundraising, too.

"We're doing poinsettia sales this year," she said. "And we'll do a drive-through barbecue for

FFA week in February."

One of Benson's teaching partners, Gregg Bridges, coaches a welding and small-engines team in FFA.

These are skills that they can use when they get out of school," Benson said. "Things that will help them to be successful in whatever career they choose. Leadership skills and being able to communicate are always valuable."

This year, the King City FFA group has 289 members from their freshman to their senior years.

"I think FFA is important because it gives kids an opportunity to build life skills, particularly public-speaking and leadership skills," Benson said.

"I think what is most important is that it builds self-esteem and personal confidence."

She said she believes that FFA plays a vital role in nurturing future agricultural leaders.

"Agriculture is important not only in our community, but nationwide," Benson said. "We need to make sure that we have leaders for agriculture. FFA offers that opportunity."

ECHO helps Gonzales senior deliver message

Lee: All women need a support system from other girls'

By SUNITA VIJAYAN
The Salinas Californian

Nicole Lee, a senior at Gonzales High School, has a mission to share with her peers.

"All women need a support system from other girls to show them that 'We can do it,'" Lee said. "We're as good as the boys and we can do anything we set our minds to."

The 17-year-old said she learned that lesson during her junior year through an after-school program known as ECHO, which stands for Education, Careers, Health and Opportunities. After finishing the program, Lee decided to return as a mentor this year to pass on the lessons to her peers at Gonzales High.

"I decided it was the perfect place to give back to my community," she said.

ECHO is a program of the nationwide nonprofit Girls Inc. organization, which has a mission of teaching young women to be strong, smart and bold. Girls Inc. of the Central Coast offers ECHO and other after-school programs throughout Monterey County to girls ages 10 to 18.

ECHO groups bring about 20 sophomores and juniors

NICOLE LEE

■ **AGE:** 17

■ **YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:** volunteer at St. Theodore's Catholic Church in Gonzales.

■ **WORK:** Youth leader for Girls Inc. at Gonzales High School.

■ **EDUCATION:** Senior at Gonzales High School.

■ **PERSONAL:** Lives in Gonzales with parents, Jason Clifford and Mona Ornelas; twin brother, Steven, and older brother Danny, 21.

together for the year at each of six Monterey County high schools. Gonzales High has 23 girls in this year's program.

Lee said each twice-monthly meeting covers a different topic in interactive ways, helping teens learn to make smart decisions about health care, leadership, community action and social interaction. She said one of the modules brings students to a college campus for a day of learning about higher education. Another takes them to Sacramento to meet with their political leaders and pitch an issue of concern to teens.

Lee said one of the things she likes most about being a mentor is the opportunity to work with her peers.

"They realize that this is a safe haven, and they see familiar faces," she said. "It's awesome to influence them in a positive way, and that's what we teach."



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Nicole Lee is a Gonzales High School senior and an education careers health and opportunity community leader.

Lee said she spends about four hours each week on planning various events while keeping up with school and volunteering at St. Theodore Catholic Church in Gonzales. "Time management is a big deal," she said. "When you really love to do something, you make time for it. I love ECHO and I love my girls."

As a mentor in the program, Lee said, her responsibilities include guiding the girls through the topics discussed and answering any questions brought forth. She said she also invites guest speakers

from organizations such as Planned Parenthood to gives talks.

"Nothing is left untouched in our modules. We go through everything," Lee said.

She said she's enjoying herself immensely and plans to continue offering her services through the program for as long as possible.

"If I can touch somebody the way I was with Girls Inc., I'll be totally happy, and it'll all be worth it," Lee said.

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