



Register photos/ERIN CALDWELL

**LEFT:** Mozie Van Raaij, Ohio Fairs' queen, left, and Abigail "Abbey" Schmidt, the 2019 Erie County Fair queen, right, place a crown on Madalyn Thayer's head as she's named the 2021 Erie County Fair queen on Aug. 10. **CENTER:** Charlie Bellamy, 5, visits with Abbey's dairy feeder before a show at the Erie County Fair on Aug. 12. **RIGHT:** Abbey gets her lamb into position during the sheep showmanship show on Aug. 11.

# A FONDNESS FOR 4-H

By ERIN CALDWELL

caldwell@sanduskyregister.com

PERKINS TWP.

4-H has been a significant part of Abigail "Abbey" Schmidt's life for the past 13 years.

With her father, Butch, being a farmer, it made sense for Abbey to be involved in the 4-H program. She grew up watching family members, like her brother, Clayton, show animals. She wanted to participate once she was old enough.

First, Abbey was entered into an open show with a hog.

"She came to the back of the barn crying, 'Don't make me go back in that ring,'" said Melissa, Abbey's mother.

Abbey said it was scary being a small kid trying to handle a hog that's more than 200 pounds within a show ring. But Abbey stuck with it and Butch spent time working with her and the hogs.

The Erie County Fair has been a way of life for the Schmidt family. When it's time for the fair in August, they spend all week there.

Abbey said she started out showing hogs because they required the least amount of work for an 8-year-old and, at the time, she wasn't vying to be good. She just wanted to say she did it. Eventually, Abbey wanted a dairy feeder because she thought they were adorable so then she showed one at the fair.

"It's been enjoyable watching her progress. Now she handles everything and I'm just there to assist," Butch said. "She takes really good care of the animals."

As time went on and Abbey gained more experience, she had an intense desire to compete. In 2019, she added lambs to her project list. Sheep quickly became Abbey's favorite animal to show.

"They are the most behaved animals, yet the hardest to show," Abbey said. "I love being challenged." Abbey remembers when the Erie County Fair had 50 to 70 lambs in the barn. There are about 20 nowadays. She wanted to bring life back to the fair so she decided to start with herself and show younger kids they can start anywhere and still accomplish their goals.

With guidance from Jake Smith, Samantha Smith, Tom Miller and their families at Milstead Club Lambs, Abbey found her true passion. She enjoys spending time with her lambs and learning about what makes them special. Lambs are unique because showing them requires a lot of trust, she said.

"I love building a bond with my animals, and although it is hard to sell them and market them at the end of my project, I find comfort in knowing I gave them the best life possible," Abbey said.

This year, Abbey got a lamb, "Lambo," in April for her market lamb project. The 2020 Perkins graduate worked with him every day when she got home from studying economics at the University of Toledo in May. Abbey



**ABOVE:** Abbey walks her lamb around the show ring at the Erie County Fair on Aug. 11. **BELOW LEFT:** After winning grand champion market lamb, Abbey gets emotional while wrapping her arm around her lamb. **BELOW RIGHT:** Abbey poses for a photo with her father, Butch, and her grand champion market lamb on Aug. 14.



also exhibited him in open and jackpot shows all summer.

"It's safe to say I truly put blood, sweat and tears into this lamb," Abbey said.

Lambo was special. "At home, he would run loose around the barn and follow me at my side like a puppy dog," she said. "He was always the first to greet me in the mornings and at night, and he would quite literally give everyone kisses."

During the fair, people frequently visited Abbey's lamb in the barn. Abbey said several people told her they stopped to say "hi" to him each day.

On the day of the sheep shows at the fair, Abbey was busy. It was already a long day. During her lamb's market class show, the judge made some nice comments. Abbey felt confident her lamb would be picked to win, but she was still nervous.

"I consider myself lucky to be involved with this program. I'm not sure where I would be without it."

Abbey Schmidt, on 4-H

"I really wanted to win being that it was my last year," she said. "I worked so hard and my entire family and team from Milstead came to watch as well."

She felt the tears coming.

The judge pointed at Abbey and shook her hand. Her market lamb won grand champion.

All Abbey wanted to do was hug

her sheep. When market animals win grand champion or reserve, they are terminal. She didn't want to say goodbye.

"He was such a good partner for me, such a good boy," she said. "I actually didn't really notice people were even looking at me. It just felt like me and my lamb. I was happy to make my farm and family proud."

While they were still in the show ring, Abbey's mentor, Miller, approached her. Abbey gave him a big hug — Abbey said she doesn't even like hugs but it was a special moment. Due to the pandemic, Miller only saw her show sheep a handful of times and hadn't been to the fair in years. She said it meant a lot to have so much support.

"We're really proud of her," Melissa said.

When it came time for Abbey to sell her sheep at the livestock

auction, she made him look his very best — she put purple animal-safe glitter on his ears and legs. It was also a celebration of how they earned grand champion together.

With her last year of 4-H coming to an end, Abbey looks back at all the friendships and memories she made.

She was crowned Erie County Fair queen in 2019. There wasn't a pageant in 2020 because of the pandemic, so Abbey spent two years as queen. She said it was the best and busiest time of her life.

Abbey traveled to festivals and fairs across the state. She also participated in parades and volunteered throughout the community while representing Erie County. Her favorite part was giving back to the community, especially by teaching about 4-H and agriculture in classrooms.

"Typically, fair queens attempt to reach every fair in Ohio, but my goal was a little different," Abbey said. "I wanted to reach the hearts of the people in my own community."

For example, Abbey and her father grew, picked and delivered about 50 watermelons to a local soup kitchen. She said it was rewarding and it taught the younger court members the power of showing kindness to others who need it most.

Abbey learned so much from participating in the fair and being in 4-H, including how to treat other people and how to present in public. Exhibiting also gave her confidence she's not sure she would have today if she didn't start 4-H.

"As a person involved in raising livestock and exhibiting them, I learned how important it is to always put your best foot forward," she said. "The fair is the only sense of agriculture some people get, so that makes it of the utmost importance to show them how animals should be treated."

Even though Abbey finished her final year in 4-H, she plans to still be a part of the program. She hopes to have her own 4-H club one day so she can help other kids succeed.

"I know I have a lot of valuable knowledge to offer, and if I can impact one child, like my parents and mentors did for me, then that will make me happy," Abbey said.

Because life is a lot different than it once was, Abbey said 4-H and agriculture is, unfortunately, a dying industry. She wants to spark an interest among youth again so they get involved in 4-H and allow the fair to grow.

Abbey gets excited when children ask her questions about her animals. She sees their eyes light up when they pet her lambs or calves. She loves inspiring others as well as instilling kindness and respect for the industry in them.

"I consider myself lucky to be involved with this program," Abbey said. "I'm not sure where I would be without it."



**LEFT:** Abbey walks her dairy feeder to the show barn during the Erie County Fair on Aug. 12. **CENTER:** Abbey and other participants stand outside the show barn as they wait for the next show. **RIGHT:** Abbey smiles after winning third place with her dairy feeder.