

NINA MOINI: Every year, thousands of Minnesota youth are bringing their animals to the State Fair. This year, along with their families, maybe their 4-H clubs or their FFA chapters, it's a big lift to prepare any animal to be judged for a ribbon at the State Fair. A little financial help can go a long way.

So the Minnesota State Fair Foundation has a grant program for first time fair goers to bring their animals to compete for a ribbon at the fair. It's called a BELLE grant. That stands for Beginning Exhibitor Livestock Learning Experience. The grant helps pay for things like travel, animal show supplies, and feed for the animals. It also helps set up the first timers with a mentor.

So we have 12-year-old Madelyn Donnelly and her mentor Allison Van Nurden here with us. Allison is in her first year of college. Hey, thank you for being here, both of you.

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Hi.

NINA MOINI: Last year of 4-H for Allison, they brought their lambs as well, stars of the show really. I'm not sure if they want to say anything. OK? Yep, we'll wait. All right. Madelyn, tell me a little bit about where you're from and a little bit about your lamb. What's its name?

MADELYN DONNELLY: My sheep's name is DJ. And I'm from Dakota County 4-H.

NINA MOINI: Wonderful. OK, so sheep or lamb. Allison, tell me a little bit about where you're from and your lamb or sheep.

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Oh, I'm from Kandiyohi County, Minnesota. And my sheep's name is Eddie.

NINA MOINI: OK, Eddie. So both of your sheep are going to compete for a ribbon later this week. Tell us a little bit about that, Allison. And what are they competing for.

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Yeah, so when we're showing our sheep, we're really-- these are market lambs, so they're kind of judged on their marketability. So the judges are looking at how much muscle they have, how good they can walk around, and how pretty they look, all combined in one.

NINA MOINI: OK. Madelyn, do you want to talk a little bit about how you got involved in 4-H and in showing a lamb? Why did you pick a lamb?

MADELYN DONNELLY: My parents were in 4-H, and it's just like a hobby that my family does. I've grown up around animals, and it teaches you lifelong skills that you can use in life. And yeah.

NINA MOINI:

OK. So I just want one of you to explain. Allison, can you just explain for folks who can't see and are listening to the program right now? They have got little outfits on. Can you talk about what they're wearing and why?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Yeah, so they have this thing called a blanket on their body. And this does a couple things. One of the main things it does is helps them be protected from flies and making sure that they don't get bitten by flies. It also can help protect against the sun if they're outside and make sure they don't get sunburned.

And also, it just helps them keep clean so that you don't have to wash them. If they're outside, they don't get full of mud or anything else like that. And then on their legs, they have these things called leg wraps. So that's the same concept. It protects their legs from flies and helps keep their leg wool clean. And leg wool is wool that we keep longer than the rest of their bodies for the show. So that's just something that sheep do. It helps them look like they have more bone and-- yeah.

NINA MOINI: OK. So, Madelyn, what's the hardest part about showing your lamb or your sheep? What kinds of questions do the judges ask? What are they looking for?

MADELYN DONNELLY: You have to prepare a long ways before the show. You want to walk your sheep to help them build muscle. You want to keep them clean--

[SHEEP BLEATS]

--grow their leg wool out.

[NINA MOINI LAUGHING]

The judges are looking at how good your lamb is and-- yeah.

NINA MOINI: Are your lambs used to then being around a lot of people, Madelyn? Or how do they act? Are they shy right now? We got a little something from one of them.

MADELYN DONNELLY: It depends if you take them to a lot of livestock shows and stuff, like mini versions of the State Fair for animals.

NINA MOINI: OK. I wonder, Allison, for folks who don't about just how much goes into showing animals-- we talked about this grant helping people out-- can you just give a summary of just how much goes into just the cost and time and otherwise of making this happen?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Yeah, so there's some different costs that go into it. First off is just buying the animal.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Some people breed their own, but I don't breed my own. So as of right now, we're working on that. So you have to buy your animal. And then all the stuff that this animal has on also is stuff that we purchased.

And one of the main expenses is actually feed because you have to feed your animal just like you feed a cat or a dog or any other pet. But a lot of work also gets put into it. I probably spend four or five hours a day in the barn, feeding and walking and working with them and getting them ready for fair.

NINA MOINI: OK. Madelyn, what's it like having a mentor in this program? What kinds of things do you find yourself needing maybe guidance on or asking advice about?

MADELYN DONNELLY: I think it's great because I have someone to go to for tips and help when I need, or if I have questions, she helps me answer them. And I'm learning a lot.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. What about you, Allison? From your perspective, what do you feel like you gain?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: I think it's great. I feel so fulfilled. When I first started showing, I was actually a pig showman. We kind of had sheep on the side. But then COVID happened. We couldn't go to as many pig shows, but there's still some sheep shows that were happening.

And a really good family friend of ours actually got us involved and served as mentors to us and our family and got us more involved in the sheep industry. So it's just really fulfilling being able to do that for another future generation and for other families.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Madelyn, what would you say to someone else who's considering showing an animal? Like, what is the most rewarding part of it?

MADELYN DONNELLY: I think the most rewarding thing is seeing all your hard work pay off because, obviously, you're spending a lot of time caring and working with these animals, and it's good to see your hard work pay off, see all that time and effort you put in really come-- like, it rewards.

NINA MOINI: Hard work, yeah. And I think it's true. People may not realize all of the hard work. They think you just show up and you show the animal. But there's so much going on behind the scenes. Allison, when did you start preparing for the events that you're going to be competing in coming up?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Well, we got our lambs home probably at the end of April this year. No, not end of April, sorry, beginning of April. And so ever since then, it's been spending some time working with them, getting them comfortable with you, getting them comfortable with other people, walking them around, teaching them how to get ready for the show. So just multiple hours every day since about the beginning of April.

NINA MOINI: I don't mean this as a silly question. I really believe it. But, Madelyn, do your lambs, your sheep have personalities? Like, what would you say their personalities are like?

MADELYN DONNELLY: Yes, they have big personalities. All sheep are different. He's a chill dude. He loves his friends. But some of my other sheep, they want to be by their friends all the time. Sometimes all they want to do-- they're very energetic animals, some of them, so they'll run laps in their pens. And they're very funny. They'll start chewing on things.

NINA MOINI: Awww. Allison, what about you? Do you look for a specific personality type that you would want to show more, if that makes sense?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Sure. I mean, I think it's always a plus to have a good personality one. For me, when I'm picking out an animal, it's not necessarily based on their personality, though. It's more based on who I think might do best in the future at a future show.

When we're picking them out, they're about three months old, so they're way smaller than they are now. So it's trying to read some future into them and see what they'll turn out to be. But it's always fun to have good personalities along the way.

NINA MOINI: OK. My favorite last question for both of you. Allison, I'll start with you. What's your favorite thing to eat at the fair or drink?

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Got to be the cream cheese, garlic cream cheese wontons.

NINA MOINI: Ooh, lovely. What about you, Madelyn?

MADELYN DONNELLY: I like the 4-H malts and cheese curds.

NINA MOINI: OK. Thank you both so much. And thank you to these beautiful sheep as well. Stars of the show here. Let's give them a round of applause.

ALLISON VAN NURDEN: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Those were BELLE grant recipients and 4-H participants, Madelyn Donnelly and her mentor Allison Van Nurden.