



Ag-Ventures student activities take place right in the field at the Maricopa Agricultural Center.

Every year more cropland is sold and converted to housing developments in Arizona. New residents, children and adults alike, are often unaware of the important role agriculture has historically played in the state. Surrounded by shopping malls and large supermarkets, they join the millions of Americans who have become further insulated from where and how their food is produced.

The Farm Ag-Ventures Program, held at The University of Arizona's Maricopa Agricultural Center (MAC), part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, bridges that gap by providing a farm experience for school children and adults. 4-H Youth Development extension agent Victor Jimenez initiated the program when he began working at MAC, a 2,100-acre farm near Casa Grande southwest of Phoenix, in 1998.

"Up to that point this farm had been basically a research and education center," Jimenez says. "My primary charge was to take what's happening here and share that with the educational community." During the first year Jimenez and his team put together basic programs and sent out flyers, hoping that about 650 teachers and school children would

## Reconnecting with Agriculture

MAC Farm Ag-Ventures Program Draws Learners of All Ages

By Joanne Littlefield

participate. They were surprised at the response.

"The first year we had 1,800 people come to the farm," Jimenez says. "Since that year it's grown. At this point we have about 4,000 people attending the programs on an annual basis."

The educational programs are adjusted to age and grade level. Schools as well as other community groups are invited — participants have ranged in age from 8 years old to 80, according to Jimenez.

"We offer rotating educational presentations of 20 minutes each on different topics," Jimenez says. The program is interactive and hands-on, with participants moving from one station to the next. The 3½-hour program includes lunch and a tour of the farm on trailers pulled by tractors.

"Sometimes visitors get to go into the field to pick corn, radishes, or whatever happens to be in season at that particular moment," Jimenez adds. "Other times we take the students out to one of our greenhouses where they'll see fish because there is an aquaculture research project here."

While the Maricopa Agricultural Center is located closest to Casa Grande and Phoenix-area schools, participants have traveled from as far away as Flagstaff. The various programs offered through Farm Ag-Ventures follow the schedule of the traditional school year from September through May only; summertime just gets too hot.

"We're finding that our biggest advertisement is just word of mouth," Jimenez says.

Tailoring the programs to the seasons means that teachers can bring their students out more than once during the school year. Programs range from the “Food, Fish, Farm Ag-Ventures” in September and October to the “Amazing Corn Festival” in October and November and the “Desert Ag-Ventures” in January and February. “Water & Science Ag-Ventures” are held in February. A new addition held in March, April and May is called “Garden Ag-Ventures” because it teaches about the plant-soil-water relationship in the small garden plot, similar to a home garden setting.

The general fee for any program is \$4 each for children or adults. There are special funds available for students from low-income schools.

Thanks to about \$50,000 in grant money obtained each year from different sources, and the help of community partners and volunteers who like what they’re doing, Jimenez has been able to augment the program with an educational trail composed of 17 different stops. Each stop represents a different vegetative zone of Arizona, including an area featuring information on crops grown by the Native American tribes in the region.

“They have a saying on the MAC farm: ‘If you eat, you’re involved in agriculture’, Jimenez says. “A lot of people think, ‘well, we don’t want to become farmers.’ Our purpose is not to make farmers out of people; it’s just to make them aware that agriculture is so important to our community and to Arizona in that it’s a multi-billion dollar industry to our state.” He adds, “We’re here to let students and teachers and people of all ages know that we’re all involved in agriculture because we all eat.”

Jimenez notes that with increasing urbanization children as well as adults are unaware of not only the importance of agriculture to Arizona’s economy but also where food actually comes from.

“When you ask a lot of the young children where their food comes from they’ll say either from the store or ‘I don’t know’,” Jimenez says. The end

result of Ag-Ventures, he hopes, is a greater appreciation of the value of Arizona’s natural resources — soil and water — coupled with abundant sunlight in an arid land environment. “We do it in a way that’s very interesting and fun. It’s all happening at the farm.”

Additional classroom space in an area called the “Faul Ag Village” was recently opened to school tours. A donation by Jim and Mary Faul of Coolidge, Arizona, who are avid UA supporters, made the new space possible. In addition to the three-classroom complex, there is a large ramada and picnic area where a 1937 John Deere tractor donated by the Fails is on display, along with new educational trails.

The couple has also donated money to the Boyce Thompson Arboretum. Both the sheep herding shed in the eucalyptus grove at the arboretum and the new suspension bridge over the upper trail were built because of their generosity.

The Fails are not only local growers, but supporters of agriculture in Arizona and of extension work. Jim Faul has been on the Pinal County ex-

tension advisory board since 1970. He and Mary wanted to do something to pay back the community for its support over the years.

“Pinal County and the state of Arizona have been very good to us,” says Mary Faul. “We love to see the kids in action, that’s what inspires us.”

Mary Faul has been in Arizona for 50 years; Jim has lived here since his family settled in the state in 1929. They farm 40 acres in an area that used to be outside Coolidge but has recently been annexed by that city. They currently grow cotton, but over the years have also planted grain and alfalfa.

They attend sessions of MAC Farm Ag-Ventures three to four times a year. “We love to see the sparkling eyes of the children,” Mary says. “The hands-on experience they get is really something to see.”

The latest addition to the MAC Farm Faul Ag-Village Learning Center is a 4-H Museum, made possible through a donation by the Oliver Anderson family. It includes displays on Arizona’s 4-H history along with over 1,000 historic 4-H photos, record books and other memorabilia collected from 4-H’ers statewide. ❖



Mary and Jim Faul, growers from Coolidge, Ariz., stand with Victor Jimenez, 4-H youth development agent, at the Ag Village that bears their name. The educational facility was made possible through their generous support.

Joanne Littlefield