Bringing Home the Bacon

Geneva 15-year-old raises show pigs for fun and profit

By Jessica Forgino

While teenagers across Seminole County repeatedly hit the snooze button in the morning, Emily Lightner has already been up for hours.

Her day begins around 5:00 a.m., when Emily puts on her rubber boots and heads to the pigpens. There she rations out food and gears up for her morning stroll on her Geneva farm – pig in tow.

"We go on long walks. It's kind of like when people jog in the morning, but I'm out walking my pig," says 15-year-old Emily, who is now in the business of raising show pigs.

It's a bustling little enterprise, Emily says, and it takes a considerable amount of work – work that requires several hours a day dedicated to training and caring for around 15 pigs at any given time.

Emily currently runs a business she calls Lightner Show Pigs and participates in various pig competitions throughout the state. Living on a farm in Geneva, Emily has grown up around animals and has turned her passion into a profit.

But what exactly does it take to raise a show pig, and how does one make money from it? While we're on the subject, what exactly *is* a show pig? Emily explains that show pigs are good breeds of female pigs that are presented at various fairs to be judged on physical looks and showmanship.

"I take a piglet probably around 40 to 70 pounds, and I raise it up to market weight which is 240, 250 pounds and up," explains Emily, who will be a sophomore next school year at Oviedo High School. "And over the course of the five months that it takes to get to that weight, I train the pig. I teach it to walk next to me and walk with me. We practice with cones, me and the pigs weaving in and out."

It was at eight years old that Emily first discovered her passion. A friend from church suggested Emily try taking a show pig to a fair, and she immediately fell in love with it. Emily's mother, Carol, says the first go-around was a wild experience, but it stuck.

"The pig was really big compared to this little kid out there walking it around," remembers Carol.

Shortly after the fair, the family traveled to Ohio, where they purchased Emily's very own show pig – the best breed you could buy – to raise and train. That first pig, named Stick-Em-Up, cost around $900.

"I just fell in love with it – fell in love with the pigs," Emily says. "And in 2011, I told my parents this is what I wanted to do the rest of my life."

Since then, Emily has taken home numerous accolades from various shows and fairs. At her latest national show, Emily placed 10th, which she says was pretty good considering more than 1,000 pigs and their handlers were vying for the top prize.

"It was tough competition," says Emily.

Locally, Emily has participated at the Central Florida Fair where she made it to the Grand Champion round. She placed first in her class this year and fourth overall.

"It was amazing because I had the only pig in the whole Grand Champion ring that was from Florida," Emily says.

She explains that the show pig business – and shows for that matter – isn't popular in Florida yet, so Emily often competes with breeders from up north.

"It's hard because in Florida there aren't many shows, and we're not a big pig state because of the heat," says Emily. "It's all about maintenance and environment for these pigs."

But beyond the fair circuit, Emily's love for raising show pigs has blossomed into a viable small business in which she actually sells her show pigs for around $175 each. Emily hopes to one day attend the University of Florida where she can further her agricultural studies. In fact, after making quite an impression on the director of the UF agricultural program's pig unit, Emily is already a semi-regular on campus.

"Every couple of months, I go up to the university and work with the head professor at the unit to either cut piglets' tails or help deliver newborns, tag them, and even give them a bath," Emily says.

As time goes on, Emily plans to build her business and continue her passion. Her parents, Jeremy and Carol Lightner, say they are behind her 100 percent.

"We support her completely," says Carol. "Of course, we sacrifice a few things to make it happen for her and to get her the quality show pigs, but she does really well in school. Emily is obviously grateful for it. She does so many things to make it happen for herself."

Geneva teen Emily Lightner with one of her prize-winning show pigs