

editor's page

What It Is—Is Human Development

Andy Griffith's record, "What It Was—Was Football," is one of my favorites. Each time I hear it I chuckle at his comic description of what we accept as a well-understood activity—football. I don't pretend to be as skillful as he is with words, but his approach provides a means to think about the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Just like football, the mission of Extension has been so commonplace for most of us that we assume everyone knows why we teach technology to our clientele. To help us think about our mission, we might paraphrase Griffith's statement and say, "What it is—is human development."

From the beginning, it has been the goal of Extension to help people improve themselves. We learned that technology was a method we could use to help them. We don't just teach technology to help our clientele improve the production of livestock, increase returns per acre, change practices in the home, or improve our communities. Our goal is to help our clientele improve themselves; to become better human beings; to live a better life.

With rapid expanding technology, present-day Extension staff members can easily miss this basic purpose of Extension.

I'll never forget the time I really learned this lesson. At an annual Extension conference at Iowa State University, when I was a young, inexperienced staff member, I heard the late Dr. E. P. "Dutch" Sylwester, Extension bontanist and plant pathologist, talk about his personal philosophy of why he taught farmers weed control practices. Now I'd assumed that he, one of Iowa State University's most successful specialists, was teaching technology to improve the production practices of the farmer. He was, but in his articulate way he communicated clearly that one reason he was successful as a specialist was that he'd taught weed control practices to help people improve themselves. He didn't use the word, but what he meant was "human development." I've been forever grateful to "Dutch" for helping me understand this point. It has made a difference in the way I've approached my work.

All Extension staff members need to understand that the ultimate purpose of their work is to help people grow and develop to become more capable human beings. If they understood and worked towards this objective, then their work would take on a different meaning and their approaches would be different. Our goal in Extension is the development of people . . . whether they be adults or young people. What it is—is human development.

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