

## SPORTSMAN PROFILE

## For Schwerd, shooting sports program is kids' stuff

By Paula Piatt

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Ballston Spa, N.Y. — It's kind of the way it's always been.

He's always hunted, fished and trapped. For as long as he can remember, he's worked with kids. For Bill Schwerd, it was just natural that those two worlds collided.

"It's a heritage for me," said the longtime sportsman education instructor and New York's 4-H Shooting Sports Program coordinator. "I'm the third generation of hunter ed instructors; my eldest son is the fourth generation." His family's involvement has spanned the history of hunter education in New York, since its 1949 inception.

For Schwerd, however, it's not a case of simply "keeping the string alive." He's involved because he truly enjoys his work — and his hobbies — although the line blurs regularly. As executive director of Cornell Cooperative Extension's Saratoga County office, Schwerd has had the opportunity to bring the outdoors to kids throughout the Capital Region.

"I think it's important," he says of the outdoor youth development programs. "I grew up hunting and fishing and trapping and I want to pass it on. I was mentored before we even knew what the word was and



Bill Schwerd teaches another group of youngsters about the great outdoors. He's been a driving force behind New York's 4-H Shooting Sports Program for over 30 years. Photo provided

now, of course, it's the thing."

Schwerd is hoping to bring the outdoors to kids who just don't have the same opportunities he did. There are a lot of kids who have no one to take them on that first rabbit hunt or to help net that first fish. And it's only the hands-on experience that will give them a reason to keep coming back.

"They can all watch the outdoors on TV, but that doesn't put a realistic spin on things. You can go out and get a spike or a doe, but according to (the

TV hunters), if it's not a 10-point, why bother?" he says.

Rather than sit back and wring his hands, Schwerd put his hands to use, helping create New York's 4-H Shooting Sports Program. Tagging along with Ron Howard as a Cornell Cooperative Extension photographer, he attended the initial organizational meeting, hosted by the National Rifle Association, in 1979. When Cornell was short on staff for the program, they turned to Schwerd. It has, of course, grown over the years and now

graduates over 200 students annually, whether it be archery, traditional rifle or muzzleloaders. About 40 of the state's 52 counties have shooting sports programs in various stages: some are struggling, some are going very well and others are just starting.

"In the last three to four years, the shooting sports have really taken off," said Schwerd, adding that it's not necessarily in the counties you would think. "Take Steuben and Otsego counties, for instance. You would have thought there would be big programs there, but there you can go outside your back door and plink a can, so they are less likely in need of a program."

All of this with only a part-time (one day a week) paid staff member who acts as a liaison with the counties. "It's all volunteers," says Schwerd.

Those volunteers, however, aren't slowing down. They are putting together a Super Saturday for women; putting an all-female leadership team together to help women learn about the outdoors. They are also still plugging away at lowering the big-game hunting age to 12 (from the current 14 which, when it was legalized was a major victory for sportsmen in New York, but is still

one of the highest legal hunting ages in the country). They are also continuing to provide more outdoor opportunities for people of all ages.

Schwerd is now looking for ways to tie his two programs together — 4-H Shooting Sports and Hunter Ed.

"The 4-H program provides the information about shooting, and then the mentors can take them hunting," he said. "We've started bringing the kids back after the hunt to talk about things. Success is measured by getting out and participating. I remember a couple of kids couldn't go hunting, so they went fishing instead. They came back with photos and stories."

And as time goes on, more and more outdoor groups are beginning to work together. Historically, rod and gun clubs have been reticent to help the 4-H program, fearing that the two were in competition with each other for the younger set.

"They're seeing that we're all in this together, trying to help our sport. They see the kids as the future and are being proactive, helping us with range time and ammunition," said Schwerd. "I would hope that with all that is going on with DEC, all the groups in the state could pull together."

But even with the clubs' help, there's always a shortage of adults interested — or qualified — to help the next generation.

"The outdoors seems to have skipped a generation," he said. "The parents quit hunting when they were 16 and now have kids who see the gun in the cabinet and are saying 'I want to hunt.' But the parents haven't done anything in years. We're putting the parents in classes, as well, and they are telling us that they are learning a lot."

Schwerd and his colleagues are working on a certification-type program for adult mentors. "We're putting together an educational outline for a program; hopefully making people feel more comfortable about leaving their kids with mentors," he said.

And, too, he says there is a rebirth of sorts in the area of hunter education. They are seeing an increased interest in people becoming instructors. The interest is evident at the annual Sportsman Educators program in Ballston Spa each January.

Schwerd hosts the state's instructors and DEC officials once a year — for almost 25 years now — for a day of discussion and education.

"It gives both sides a chance to get together and ask questions of each other," he says. "We've had as many as 47 counties represented at one time and, for the largest gathering, there were between 325 and 350 people."

It's a lot of hard work, getting people outdoors. But he still finds the time to get out there himself. Deer hunting and trapping are his favorite pastimes, and he still likes the occasional pond jumpshoot for ducks. Of course, he also enjoys small game such as grouse and woodcock. He doesn't fish as much as he once did, but there's only so many hours in a day, usually not enough.

For Bill Schwerd, it's kind of always been that way.