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Belvidere podiatrist steps in to save 1,500-pound champion steer

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Story By Andrea Lovas

BELVIDERE — At farm shows and 4-H fairs, when an animal becomes Grand Champion, it is often sent to auction to the highest-bidding butcher. For the youngsters who breed, raise, work with and show the animals, it can sometimes be a tough reality to accept. They often become close with the animals, like any child would with a family pet.

So when Winchester, a beloved steer owned by 16-year-old Julie Poliskiewicz, was facing such a fate, Dr. Amanda Richline, a Belvidere podiatrist, wanted to save the 1,500-pound animal.

Dr. Richline had heard of the predicament Julie and Winchester were facing from Julie's mother, Michele Hawk, a patient of Richline's. Michele said she lamented the situation, but knew that if Winchester won, there was nothing they could do. In order to enter the livestock market shows, the animal's owner must agree that if her animal becomes champion, it will be sold at auction. Dr. Richline, who said she was shocked to hear that the prize-winning animal would be killed, wanted to help.

Julie has been involved with her local 4-H club since she was 8-years-old, raising and showing a range of livestock including pigs, goats, sheep and steers. 4-H's mission is to allow young people to develop the skills and confidence that will guide them through life and help mold them into an active member of the community. Raising animals is one of many 4-H projects that the club supports and provides guidance with. After completing these projects, 4-H reports that the kids develop a sense of pride and accomplishment in a job well done.

It's a tough job for sure: raising a steer requires hours of hard work each day, often in the early morning hours. The kids inevitably grow fond of the animals they are raising. Julie purchased Winchester last fall when he was 500 pounds. Julie took care of Winchester every day, working with him and getting him ready to be shown, and the two became good friends, she said. A well-behaved, fine-groomed steer weighing in at a whopping 1,500 pounds, Winchester had won prizes at other shows over the summer, so Julie knew that there was a good chance her steer would eventually be named grand champion.

At the Blue Valley Farm Show in August, Winchester placed first in the heavy-weight market steer class. He was a grand champion.

"I was holding my breath when the judge was about to select Grand Champion," recalled Julie. "Then he walked over to me and Winchester, patted him on the rump and we won."

Winchester was scheduled for sale at auction, where a butcher would pay thousands to slaughter and butcher him. The market sales, where prize-winning animals are sold, sometimes raise money for 4-H clubs and other non-profit organizations. At the Blue Valley Farm Show, however, the kids get to keep all the money they win from sale of their animals. Grand champions typically bring in significant amount of money over the animals sold at auction.

Dr. Richline sent Michele to bid on her behalf, instructing her to bid at whatever level it took to save Winchester. The bidding got intense: grand champion beef is sold for top dollar at butchers and meat counters. Michele kept at it though, and in the end, Winchester was again Julie's, saved from slaughterhouse with an all-time record high bid.

Winchester now lives on Del Brook Farm, which belongs to Michele's parents. Julie plans to use the money she's won from showing him towards a college education. She'd like to be either a nurse or a large veterinarian. Dr. Richline said she is happy to have given Winchester back to Julie and delights in knowing that Julie plans to work towards a degree in medicine.

"When I heard about the 4-H policy to send champions off to auction, I decided to make Winchester one of the lucky ones," she said. "I love knowing that he's living out his days on Del Brook Farm and enjoying his life with Julie."