

Friendly but fearsome

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Mike McCollum

William Vos gives one of his white tigers a pet through the bars yesterday before show time at the Santa Cruz County Fair. Vos, of Holland, said he has been training tigers for more that 30

years. Vos and his tigers perform daily at the fair with shows at 4, 6 and 8 p.m. through Friday; 2, 5 and 7 p.m. Saturday; and 1, 3 and 5 p.m. Sunday. See page 2 for more on the fair.

Watsonville woman is fair's 'top mom'

By ETHAN BARON
STAFF WRITER

Jennelle Ragan cradled her roses and wiped away tears after a panel of four judges at the Santa Cruz County Fair yesterday voted her Santa Cruz County "Mom of the Year."

"My family is my No. 1 priority, outside of the Lord," the 53-year-old Watsonville grandmother said.

Judges evaluated essays written by contestants' children, and in one case a husband. They considered both a mother's qualifications and the degree to which the essay touched them personally, said Mary Ellen Duell, a producer of the event.

Ragan's daughter, Michelle Underwood, 35, of Watsonville, wrote the winning essay, in which she described the reasons her mother deserved the award.

Reading the narrative at the fairgrounds amphitheater yesterday afternoon, Underwood described her mother as a compassionate and supportive woman who stood by at the births of four of Underwood's children and now takes care of five grandchildren full time. She told the crowd of about 100 people that her mother had a small house built behind her own for

her mother and stepfather.

When the earthquake hit in 1989, Underwood said, her mother took in so many people whose houses had been ruined or damaged that she had 24 people living in her home.

Although she was pleased by the award, Ragan seemed to enjoy hearing her daughter's tribute even more than being voted the county's "Mom of the Year."

"She's very quiet when it comes to showing her affections," Ragan said of her daughter. "(The essay) shows that she loves me very much."

Born in Dallas, Texas, Ragan came to California with her parents when she was 3 months old. She has lived in the Watsonville area since she was 5.

When she was in the seventh grade, she looked out of the window of her house and saw the boy who would one day be her husband. "I thought 'Man, what a cute little guy, and it just kind of took off from there,'" Ragan said, obviously relishing the memory.

The two have been married 36 years. "We've never had but one argument in all that time," she said, then chuckled. "That's because he gives in to me."

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Kurt Ellison

This year's county fair was extra-special for Watsonville's Jennelle Ragan, 'Mom of the Year.'

MOM

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In between having and rearing two daughters and two sons, Ragan worked in the fruit-canning sheds, and for seven or eight years ran a beauty salon out of her home. When she thinks of the past, she remembers slower lifestyles — and slower children.

"Children are so rebellious nowadays," she said. "You have to watch 'em with one eye 24 hours a day."

Unfortunately for Ragan, her ever-watchful eye doesn't catch quite everything.

A few days ago, her grandchild-

dren were playing with some pebbles and left them below the porch. Ragan stepped off the porch and onto the stones. "Snap, snap, snap," she said, describing the sound of three bones breaking in her foot.

Although temporarily confined to a wheelchair, her face lit up when she described how her 3-year-old grandson kissed her foot to make it feel better after the accident.

Her daughter's essay will be sent to the state "Mom U.S.A" finals, which will take place in Los Angeles in March. If Ragan wins, she will enter the national finals and have a chance at the grand prize, a trip for two to the Bahamas.