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Nourishing Hearts and Minds at Terra Firma Farm

by Michele M. Delima

The serene contentedness and clean earthy smell of Terra Firma Farm on a clear September morning is heavenly. Verdant fields roll, dip and seamlessly ease their way into the farm next door, providing a long, open view of pastoral beauty. Animals happily munch and snooze about the farm as birds sing and crickets chirrup. And the homestead, barn and out-buildings complete the view in classic New England tradition.

Yet the quiet morning I met with Brianne Casadei, Executive Director of Terra Firma, belies amazing activity that occurs here every day. As we toured the farm, Brie explained how the farm's teaching programs and practices enhance the farm's organic mission. We met the goats first. As Brie called, "Goats! Goats!" heads popped up all over the hillside pasture and several goats scampered up hoping for a treat. Easily handled by children, the goats are friendly and full of beans. The 15 or 20 Boer Goats raised on the farm each year also have an important job: when the gardens have been exhausted and go to weed, the goats and pigs are given liberty to chew and fertilize their way through, readying the garden for the following season.

We visited the sheep next. The 8 ewes and 3 lambs share their pasture with 3 donkeys which protect the lambs from coyote and fox. These furry friends also pull carts for kids who like to brush and groom the donkeys and lead them on halters.

There's a large flock of laying hens, too; kids love to hold and feed them

and collect their eggs. Celeste the Dexter milking cow helps the farm produce milk, cheese, butter and ice cream. Along with Celeste and her calf, fifteen Lowline Angus cows are pastured on the neighbor's fields. Plus there are ducks, turkeys and bunnies for the littlest children to handle.

But most kids' favorite animal? Johnny the Boar! Birthed into the hands of children three years ago this Tamworth heritage breed pig now weighs 600 pounds. Kids love lavishing attention on this gentle giant, bathing him and scratching behind his ears, and Johnny is happy to let them sit upon his back. New piglets are always sweet and more are on the way: Apple the sow is expecting this October and Cider is expecting in four months.

Founded in 2003, Terra Firma Farm is a non-profit community farm

and educational center. The 1700 house and 22-acre property are owned by Connecticut Landmarks (owner of the Nathan Hale Homestead and 10 other historic properties). When Brie and her husband Ethan first arrived at the farm, they and a league of volunteers accomplished an amazing transformation. They cleared 25 years worth of overgrowth from around the house and fields and built the barn, enclosed market stand and shed. In 2004 they launched the kids programs. "Five years ago, I never would have believed we would become so big," Brie smiled.

Now in their sixth year, Terra Firma enjoyed a 30% increase in the number of children enrolled in their summer program, with 50 to 60 kids in atten-



Finding pumpkins to treasure at Terra Firma Farm. Photo by Alex Oat

dance every week. Brie cited two well-timed causes. For some, sending their kids to a local summer camp made economic sense. But further, with the recent advent of books and documentaries revealing unsettling facts about the nation's food supply, parents have become more knowledgeable and have begun seeking educational environments that foster healthful eating, teach the value of recycling and reusing, and instill respect for the land and animals that provide for them.

It is the cycle of life in plain view that is integral to all children's programs at the farm. Except for select breeding animals, the goats, lambs, piglets and cows are raised for meat. All animals, many heritage breeds, live outdoors, are raised organically and have free range of their generous pastures.

"The kids get it," explains Brie, "it's black and white for them. We are up-front telling them that animals on the farm are raised for meat. Kids also learn that our animals have the best possible life, a much different existence than one of confinement farming. They are comfortable with the cycle of life that exists on the farm, take it in stride, and embrace all of it."

And there is so much to embrace and learn! Terra Firma offers programs for every age group throughout every season. After-school programs offer K-8 grade students a fresh snack followed by fun chores such as feeding the animals and collecting eggs. Children then may garden, cook, make cheese or butter or create nature crafts. Special Saturday programs for kids 5-12 pack four hours with typical farm activities plus seasonal joys such as baking harvest bread, decorating pumpkins or making corn bread and a Thanksgiving craft. And the groups have adventures in the woods, pastures and barns.

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Abby and Chip having a relaxing moment on the farm. Photo by Sarah Edmond

School programs for K-5 graders complement requirements of the Connecticut Core Science Curriculum. From monthly in-school Terra Firma staff visits and two field trips to the farm, students learn about pollination, conservation, plant growth and animal life cycles. Second graders, for example, learn about nutrition, composting and worms plus they get to hatch ducklings!

Weekly themed summer camp programs, for children 3 and up, incorporate all aspects of farm life plus wildlife observation and nature walks. Kids also tend and harvest from whimsical pizza, snacking and salsa raised-bed gardens planted by after-school kids the prior spring. And there's a strict code for lunches and snacks: no sugary treats or soda. All staff pack an ideal lunch and sit with the kids each day. Inspired by talks about nutrition and reducing waste, by week's end many campers take pride packing their own healthy, waste-free lunches.

In 2009 the Helping Harvesters day camp for teens 13-15 was funded by a grant from an anonymous family foundation. Ten to twenty campers attend each weekly session; some the entire 6-week program. Groups are formed and given responsibility for 1 acre of gardening space. The groups do garden chores, wash and bag vegetables, wash and box eggs, record yields, and man-

age the farm stand. After a bit of time to relax in the afternoon, campers help feed the animals and prepare the evening meal to celebrate the day's work. Apart from their invaluable service to the farm, participants' awareness and desire to help others grows as does their self esteem and confidence for taking ownership in the process; well-earned rewards for work well done.

When kids spend time on the farm, their busyness slows when they collect warm, just-laid eggs, marvel at new hatchlings or gaze into the eyes of animals under their care. They have time to absorb all the farm offers, count the myriad delightful farm smells and listen to the sounds that accent every season. Their desire to protect and cherish the earth blossoms while the lure of nature and splendid simplicity of witnessing the timeless cycles of growing and harvesting nourishes their hearts and minds.

"For me Terra Firma is a way of life, it's who I am," Brie added. "Farming with the community and most importantly with the kids that come here is my way of pursuing peace. Yearning to live lightly on the planet while contributing to the future generations...that's why I do this."