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Starts with the decision to try!



Elizabeth Keller

And the Camp Wisdom Foundation did just that! Providing out-of-school programs for public elementary school students in Jackson, Mississippi, Camp Wisdom ensures all children have the experiences, tools and opportunities necessary to reach their full potential. In support of their City's children and the dedicated, but at-risk, families who want a better life for them, this summer they made the decision to journey from Jackson, Mississippi, to Farms For City Kids in Reading, Vermont.

On any journey it is the unplanned happenings that make each accomplishment so meaningful and rewarding. Says Camp Wisdom Foundation Founder/Director, Elizabeth Keller, "Because we had never been to the Farms For City Kids program and because we all know the Internet can often make things look better than they actually are, it is fair to say there was some apprehension as we made our way to Spring Brook Farm. However, as we drove the long road up to the Farm, it was clear that



Farms For City Kids had all the strength and beauty the Internet had shown us. It was gorgeous and we knew we were in for one amazing week! We could see acres of pasture, woods, streams, lakes, cows and barns. None of us could have imagined the beauty we found at Farms For City Kids."

"We tumbled out of the van, settled the students in the dorm, discussed schedules, created teams by hat color, worked out jitters and began what would be our routine for the next five days. And the next five days were filled with adventures and new experiences. The students learned how to clean out cow stalls and replace sawdust in cow beds, they saw the many uses for cow manure in fertilizing the hay fields and garden

areas, they learned that the sawdust in the cow beds comes from the furniture factories and how important it is to keep the cow stalls clean if the cows are to produce clean milk. They used measuring and capacity building skills that needed to be mastered when making calf formula and scooping grain pellets. Said student Dakovas, "To feed the cows I had to use my math skills. But this was like real world math, not just book math. If I could learn like this at school back home, I'd love school. But at least now I have a better understanding of how important it is to pay attention in my school classes because if I didn't, I would not have been able to do the math to feed the cows."

Said Elizabeth, "Our students also learned the nutritional value of a cow's meal and it's relationship to its milk. They learned about the milking process, pasteurization and cheese production. They milked the cows by hand and realized how long it takes to get a glass of milk after hand-milking and how vital technology is to the dairy industry. They saw the importance of modern technology, but learned how to do nearly everything without it.

"Our students worked in the barn, the dairy, the garden and the cheese house. Each day the students rotated through these four learning environments and became adept at the skills and knowledge needed to manage the daily chore sets. The rotation insured all teams gained full knowledge of the farm duties. The chores themselves were all designed to develop cooperation, organization, math, environmental and earth science, social studies and vocabulary skills."



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“It was amazing to see our student ‘farmers’ actively engaged in their chores. They worked hard to solve problems and relied on each other in the true sense of teamwork to meet their goals and responsibilities each day.”

Said student Chelsea, “I am so happy because I thought we’d be observing, but instead we do the actual work. I love that the farm staff trusts us to help them. We were really hands-on and needed each day.”

And says student Jumoke, “I had never seen a cow before and I learned you have to take care of them. They are very sensitive; you have to keep them clean and fed; you have to make sure their beds are just right because if you don’t, they’ll be rowdy and uncomfortable. I never knew how much patience and work it took to care for cows.”

Elizabeth said, “Our student farmers became brave and strong and developed the wisdom to know what not to fear. They were proud of what they were accomplishing. They fed the chicks and held them; felt their bony little bodies, and squealed at how soft they were. Each day of chores brought new stories, tons of laughter and countless lessons. What had generated nose pinching and eye rolling on Day One was replaced with pride and accomplishment by Day Five.”

And the accomplishments were many. Said Elizabeth, “One of our students has older siblings at home to direct her daily routines, like getting herself dressed each day. Here, she was adamant



that she needed ‘help’. The other girls saw this and realized it was not that she didn’t want to, she actually didn’t know how to take care of herself. It quickly became apparent this was going to be a growth experience for her and we began to help her achieve a new level of independence.

“The Farm experience showed her just how much she could accomplish. The first day on the farm, she ran from the cows. Today she milked one... it was amazing! A newfound level of confidence enabled her to do things she had no idea she could. In that instant, she understood that she simply had to try... that all of us have fears to conquer to achieve new successes in our life. It is safe to say we will all leave the Farm altered, just some more dramatically than others.”

And life altering experiences were evident throughout the week with one of the most rewarding coming from the garden. Elizabeth said, “Our most resistant student gardeners back home referred to the Farm’s garden as ‘fun’ because it provided truly new experiences for them. The soil was soft and malleable to touch, very different from our Mississippi clay soil. The kids all found it fascinating that soil could be ‘that different’. The hard, heavy soil of the South was replaced by soft, powder-like dirt of the North and was a joy to work with. It was also between 60 and 75-degrees during most of our chore time versus the 100-degree temperatures and full humidity that our students are used to in Mississippi. Weeding in soft soil and 70 degree weather would make any Mississippi farmer happy, especially when they are ten years old.

“In Vermont, they were also still planting seeds in June while in Mississippi we were already harvesting. It was a great North meets South experience. There was water in the wooden water barrels located around the garden and the students used it for watering the plants. Our students commented, ‘The water would have evaporated if we were in Mississippi’. They also thought it was funny that in Mississippi we use a greenhouse to keep out the heat while in Vermont they use it to keep the heat in.

“The students learned about soil, organic gardening and weeding, and we all got a valuable lesson in composting. Back home our garden compost had been a disaster and here we learned how to repair and enhance it. A new compost design was already on the table and a top priority for when we return to Jackson.



“From the garden we also experienced one of the great teaching moments on the farm. On Wednesday the Red Team went to the Farmer’s Market in Woodstock, Vermont, to sell Spring Brook Farm’s cheese, maple syrup, lettuce and beans.

“The students set up the Farms For City Kids booth, answered questions, requested donations and engaged all who visited the booth. People could not believe that these young students had come all the way from Mississippi. It was wonderful to see our young ‘farmers’ engage with people, so far from their own homes, but in a place with as old and rich a farming history as their own. The Farm was thrilled at the proceeds generated by the students’ efforts and excited by the new friends the students had garnered for the Farm.”

Said student Simone, “It was so exciting to see how our hard work in the garden resulted in sales at the Farm’s Stand. It was a new experience for us and we did really well. Not only did we sell the Farm products but through our conversations about our Farm experience, we motivated many people to donate to the Farm. And we realized we experienced a whole new way to make a living, one we never really thought about.



“When I get back home I’m going to tell my friends to go to www.farmsforcitykids.org to get an application to see if they can come experience the Farm for themselves! I’ll tell them a little bit about what we did, but I don’t want to spoil it for them. I’ll also tell them when they get older they might have a chance to have their own farm and, by being here, they’ll get a better glimpse of what kind of life that would be.”

Then, says Elizabeth, “Before we knew it Friday was suddenly upon us... bringing the usual morning chores which were done efficiently and quickly. Another gorgeous day, our last, was in the making as the sun rose and the energy of the farm began to build. Time had gone too quickly but each one of us had made more connections with nature, with animals, with food and with ourselves than we had ever expected.”

EXPECTATIONS... THE DECISION TO TRY... for the Camp Wisdom students it was a week full of realized ACCOMPLISHMENTS!

Children come to Farms For City Kids with acute minds and an unwavering curiosity. Our goal is to capitalize on, and celebrate, those gifts. The secret is guiding children to their gifts so they can focus and build on them. And these students did that and more... they succeeded because they looked at hurdles during the week as growth experiences rather than stumbling blocks.

The Camp Wisdom students have closed this incredible chapter in their lives. And now each of them moves forward and holds the pen that will transcribe their next chapter. And having known them for this past week, we know what a bright and exciting chapter that will be!

