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FARMS FOR CITY KIDS®



SPRING BROOK FARM
READING, VERMONT

2015 Spring Newsletter

**MOOS
FROM
THE
FARM**

A Teacher's Reflection...



farmsforcitykids.org

On Her Students' Week At The Farm

This past October, Park Place Community Middle School in Brooklyn, NY, attended the Farms For City Kids™ program. Teacher Ariel was so impressed with the program that she kept a journal for the entire week and forwarded it to us upon her return to school. What follows are some of the adventures Ariel and her students experienced as they helped run Spring Brook Farm for a week.

"As a teacher, it is my goal that my students not only learn content, but also that they develop an appreciation for education and build positive self-esteem through their academic accomplishments," says Ariel. "Our week at Farms For City Kids embodied and exceeded that goal. I witnessed my students take risks and try new things. They actively learned and exhibited gratitude for their Farm teachers and each other. Each student worked hard and applied what they learned to be successful in every task. They took pride in what they did and what they said. I was surprised everyday with my students' impressive capabilities. I feel like a better teacher as a result of this experience and truly believe, without a doubt, that a program like this should be mandatory for every middle school student in the country. My students were already asking to come back before we even left."

Day 1

MONDAY

I could tell my students were excited to begin our journey, despite that it started at 6:30 AM. On our travel to Vermont, the students enjoyed each other's company and their laughter and camaraderie filled the bus as our voyage continued deeper and deeper into rural United States. Their inquisitive expressions were filled with thrill as they pointed out the different sights of the big, vast fields, old houses, cows and other farm animals. We were clearly far away from our home in Brooklyn, NY.

When our bus arrived, the Farm staff greeted us, and as we toured the Farm on our way to the dorm, the students voiced their curiosities and their eagerness to work with the animals they were seeing, hearing and most of all smelling. It was very impressive to see the amazing facilities of Spring Brook Farm. The staff is passionate about educating young people about farms, the work of farmers and their contributions to society. And that passion was obvious in the previous students' educational art that decorates the dorm walls.

After a brief safety and logistics introduction and a delicious lunch, the students were split into three teams. The Farm staff relied on our relationship with the students to group them and set them up for success. And then our students were off, geared up and ambitious. They milked cows, cleaned heifer pens and fed the cutest calves. I was so impressed with my students' enthusiasm and hard work... and it's only Day 1!

As we settled down for the evening, the students shared their first day impressions through soulful conversations and journaling, complete with illustrations. I began to feel a sense of family unity, trust and confidence with my students that I've always hoped for.



The atmosphere was weightless and filled with cheerfulness. Our students' natural vitality shines in a glamorous yet humble way; they were uninhibited, playful and sweet. It was fantastic! Bedtime was a little hectic. The students' excitement, along with the initial awareness of sleeping in the wilderness, made for mischievous spirits. I predicted they would have a rude awakening when they awoke the next morning at 6:30 AM.

Day 2

TUESDAY

As expected, my 'good morning' wakeup call was met with disgruntled middle school farmers. Surprisingly, all of the students made their way up to the common room and the Farm's bright-eyed staff welcomed us to our second day. Students enjoyed a kick-off snack of apples and granola bars and then it was time to begin our morning responsibilities.

Some students fed hungry baby cows while others milked mother cows. The girls and I went to the Cheese House. We were given a short and interesting lesson about how cheese

is made with only three ingredients: milk, rennet and bacteria. Adding different bacteria to milk makes different cheeses. We peered through wide windows to see the huge machines involved with the earlier stages of cheese production. Cheese has to sit in a special temperature controlled room in order to age into the perfect flavor. At that point we all got suited up in white jump suits and tall rain boots and blue rubber gloves and hair nets to protect the cheese from being contaminated. Students were able to participate in treating the cheese with brine as it needs to sit for several months before it is sold for consumption. The smell in the cheese room was unusual and pungent but at the end everyone was rewarded with a slice of delicious, yummy cheese!

We head back to the dorm for a delicious breakfast. Students engaged in lively conversations as they enjoyed nutritious foods. This mealtime dynamic was strikingly different from our school cafeteria. They sat respectfully, chatted nicely, cleaned their plates and had seconds. The best part was the Farm kitchen rule -- the students needed to taste EVERYTHING! I was thrilled for the students to have an opportunity to try new foods. After breakfast, the Farm staff presented a workshop called "From Scratch". The students had an opportunity to choose an item -- like a computer keyboard, wool socks, a teddy bear, empty food packages -- from a big bin of "stuff". The students' task was to decide where each of the items came from: the natural world, a farm, factory or a store. We learned that all things we use come from the earth or are produced by hard working farmers and why it is imperative to take care of our earth and respect the people who make our comfort items possible.



After the workshop, it was back to the dairy and small animal barn where the calves are kept in pens. We cleaned the pens with big brushes, soap and muscle. Newborns need to be kept in clean areas to prevent illness. I admired my students' willingness to get dirty. They did great work as a team and communicated effectively and kindly. Their great teamwork was my proudest moment!



After lunch the Navy Team and I headed up the hilly road to the garden. Although the season is ending shortly, we got to see lush spinach and lettuce beds. As we prepared the plant beds for next season, the girls uncovered earthworms and other insects. They carefully picked them up and placed them in a remote area of vegetation so they wouldn't be disturbed. It was great to witness them being so considerate to

even the smallest animals they were working with. We toured the greenhouse and I loved exploring the aromas, flavors and textures of the parsley, mint, lavender, dill and basil plants. Then we picked some of the vegetables we would later eat for dinner, learning there are different varieties of traditional vegetables like purple, white and yellow carrots; and learned they are eating the root when they eat vegetables like carrots, onions, leeks and potatoes.

From there I joined the Tan Team feeding the chickens in the chicken coop. One of my goals for my students this week was that they would develop an appreciation for the food they eat. I was overjoyed when a student asked, "So is this the same chicken that we eat? When we eat chicken, this is what it is?" YES! What a wonderful teachable moment to explore how important it is to have respect and appreciation for the foods they eat. Then each team picked apples from the orchard and tonight we prepped them for tomorrow night's dessert: *apple pie!*

It was so exciting for our students to not only experience 'farm to plate', but to experience it firsthand as each harvested the food they ate! The students peeled the apples like pros! Then they measured and added flour, sugar and cinnamon to their mix. Their desire for fresh apple pie grew as each snuck a taste of their delicious creation.



Day 3

WEDNESDAY

In the morning, the students awoke with more ease than the day before. Assembling into their teams, off they hiked to the farm. This walk to the farm is wonderful. The woods around us are still and the world is quiet of modern sounds. The air is cool and moist on our faces and the smell of autumn leaves overwhelms the atmosphere. The dry leaves crunch with every step. On one side, the majestic heifers roam the field and graze on the thinning autumn grass. Soon they will be brought inside the barn to be safe from the cold of the winter. We pass the pigs scampering around their spacious pen and the turkeys waiting to be let out of their pens into the morning fog.



I join the Tan Team in the dairy barn. The most important job of the day is to clean, clean, clean. The dairy barn needs to be sanitary as this milk is used for making cheese and other dairy products sold to the public. Plus, the whey feeds the other animals on the farm. But, before we clean, we need to herd the dairy cows to the pasture to graze on the grass. Next I head back to the small animal barn as the girls finish up taking care of the calves. They gave each calf a milk formula, measured the grain they ate and added more to the bucket so each specific calf would have the right amount. They documented everything, cleaned the manure out of the pens and swept the floor.

I was blown away by the girls' dedication to taking care of their assigned calf. They treated each calf with respect and compassion – it made me very proud to be their teacher. Watching my students complete each task with smiles and excitement was my favorite part of the day.

After breakfast the students participated in a Nutrition Workshop. They learned about how to identify whole foods and why they are so important. Whole foods are foods in which their ingredients are most similar to how they were produced by the earth and the easiest for our bodies to digest. They explored vegetables, fruits, grains and herbs. They felt, smelled and tasted a variety of foods and learned about the health benefits of the different foods we had been harvesting and eating during our stay on the farm.

One of the aspects of this trip that has exceeded my expectations has been how involved the students have been at making the foods they've been eating. This afternoon, the students took turns picking bins of apples, washing, grinding and pressing them into cider. A fascinating fact about our experience of pressing cider is that the machines we used would be recognized by cider pressers in the 1800s! It was such a delight to make sweet golden cider.



After lunch, our students had the pleasure of cleaning manure from the heifer barn. Cows can eat 60-90 pounds of food and drink about a bathtub of water daily. So that means they produce tons of manure that must be cleaned out. The students, armed with shovels and wheelbarrows, worked as a great team, communicating effectively and helping each other.

After another delicious dinner the students got ready for a festive activity. They teamed up and carved pumpkins! I was surprised to learn that many of them had never carved pumpkins before. What a great treat for them! They were instructed to think of the most imaginative, original jack-o-lantern face. After drawing on the pumpkin they were given tools to carve their masterpiece. First, they carved a hole on top and scooped out the goopy insides, separating the seeds for the kitchen staff to prepare for snacks tomorrow. When the pumpkin lanterns were complete, we lit them and they shone brightly in the dark... more spooky as a group than any one standing alone. And shining as brightly as my students' amazing teamwork this week! Then they were rewarded



with delicious apple pie... appreciating every juicy bite, clearly satisfied with their work from the night before. Off to bed, our final full day awaits!

Day 4

THURSDAY

By today, my students knew the routine like professionals. The Farm staff worked phenomenally well with them. One thing I noticed immediately was the staff's ability to learn our students' names so quickly – by the end of the first day! The staff always had warm, friendly smiles and spoke in enthusiastic and trustworthy tones. They respected them like team members and that built up our students' confidence to successfully complete every task on the farm. The students beamed with pride as they headed out for morning chores in the dairy barn, cheese house and small animal barn.

Once done, we prepared to hike to the 'Top of the World'! Vermont is famous for maple syrup and on our hike we got to tour Spring Brook Farm's sugar bush, a group of maple trees that produce syrup. The sap of the tree carries beneficial nutrients throughout the tree which is why maple trees need to be at least 40 years old before they can be tapped for syrup – you need to wait until the tree is strong enough to share its sweet goodness with us.

It was an incredible sight to be in the sugar bush. Low tubes stretched across the woods attached to the tap in the trees. The intercut system of tubes forced us to maneuver like secret agents trying to access an interwoven laser-armed safe. The sap is eventually collected into one tube that leads to the maple syrup house. As we marched carefully to where the maple sap is turned into syrup, the Farm staff pointed out the different plants and wildlife we saw and heard along the way. We also had an opportunity to stand in silence to observe the unique woodland noises. We reached the maple syrup house where we saw huge wood burning ovens that boil the sap at over 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Workers wear thick leather gloves and aprons for protection against the inferno temperatures as they meticulously craft the sweet, nutritious maple syrup.

Through the heifer pastures we hiked to the 'Top of the World'. My students continuously blew me away with their persistent grit. This was a steep and rocky hike; they simply put one foot in front of the other until we reached the end. The view alone was reward enough for our strenuous journey. We had a panoramic view of the rolling mountains of Vermont. The 'Green Mountain State' was only partially green as autumn was devouring it. Rich colors of amber, orange and yellows, plus purplish-red treetops covered the enormous and endless mountains.

We enjoyed a delicious barbeque meal that was grilled over a big, stone fire pit. Then the students played and explored... their faces and spirits were exhilarated! They took turns on an awesome tire swing and helped each other climb trees.

When exploring, they found a wilderness shelter that was built to demonstrate how someone might survive if stranded in the woods.

Before afternoon chores, the students' Farm knowledge was put to the test as they enthusiastically played a lively game of Jeopardy! Split into chore teams, each took a turn in the hot seat. The students were so excited to show off their knowledge and I was so impressed at how much they had retained.



After dinner we took a nighttime walk to the fire pit to roast marshmallows. Our pitch-black walk was only lit by our ghoulishly designed, blazing jack-o-lanterns. At the clearing we sat on wooden logs around the fire pit. Farm educator Molly shared with us a legend of how the stars came to be. She pointed out the Big and Little Dippers along with how to spot the Milky Way. In contrast to the city, there was no light or pollution in the sky of Reading... the stars twinkled vibrantly against the dark sky. We sat enjoying each other's company and our delicious S'mores, yum!

Day 5

FRIDAY

Happy Halloween! On our final morning, each student bid farewell to the cherished calf they had been assigned to take care of. It was so sweet to witness each student's affection for the baby animal who had depended on them this past week. After chores, we responsibly cleaned our dorm rooms until the space we occupied looked as clean as the day we arrived.

Next, the staff honored students in an Award Ceremony. They explained why each Award recognition is valued and how it represents a unique individual character trait. Each student received an award along with a t-shirt and a personal totem. The totems are made up of accumulated beads the students had earned for good work and dedication. Pride illuminated each student's face as the Farms for City Kids staff recognized each of them with an abundance of kindness and knowledge. Then as they loaded onto the bus with tearful eyes, I could see in their faces the gratitude they had for this special and unique farm experience.