



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BECKET FAMILY OF SERVICES

Kids learn that if they treat an animal with kindness and respect, they will have a friend that will love them regardless of what their hair looks like and what kind of clothes they wear.

Helping Troubled Youth

School strives to help kids learn and grow by working with animals and the land.

by **Angie Stump Denton**

Three years ago a young man almost 17 years old found his way to Becket Family of Services and was placed in the school's Hall Farm Stewardship Program near Pike, N.H. The boy had many problems getting along with his peers and with adults. Once at the school, officials determined he liked to work — but mostly by himself.

"We'd give him jobs like checking fences, trimming under the electric fences or any type of hard labor job, and he'd be happy," says Pat Underhill, farm manager. "He liked the cattle and



Pat and Hugh Underhill are farm managers of Becket's Hall Farm Stewardship Program near Pike, N.H.

soon became good help in moving groups, dehorning or teaching calves to lead. He also learned to drive the tractor and clipped most of our pastures."

The boy was from another state, and soon after he turned 18, that state ended his funding. Pat says there was quite a bit of concern that he might end up in jail soon after his discharge.

"However, he came back to visit about a year later and wanted us to know that he had a full-time job with a property maintenance company, had bought a small pick-up truck and had his own apartment," she says with pride. "He told us his goal is to save

enough money to buy a small farm and have some beef cattle someday.

"He had learned enough skills during his time with us to manage his anger problems, he had enough work skills to hold a job, and he was paying taxes and staying out of trouble. Here at Becket — that's success," she says.

About the school

The Becket Family of Services has been educating youth and adolescents since 1964. The school's purpose is to give troubled kids with learning disabilities and emotional handicaps a safe place to learn and grow.

"We use the animals and land to teach young people the ethics of the workplace, the importance of community, and the value of education," Pat says.

About 100 boys, age 12 to 18, are enrolled at Becket with about 16 at the Hall farm campus. The

boys are placed in the school by the court system. It is a residential program, so the boys actually live on the farm.

Pat and her husband, Hugh, serve as farm managers. The school has the use of about 2,200 acres, much of it wooded. The farm includes 100 beef cows and calves including registered Herefords, miniature Herefords, Gelbvieh and some Gelbvieh crosses. The students also help with a

flock of laying hens and other kid-friendly animals — a donkey, sheep, goats and a small flock of chickens. Hugh says the boys do chores each day and are then given some sort of farm project to do such as cutting wood, gardening, teaching a calf to lead, farm maintenance and building fence. The experience builds a strong work ethic as well as requires a great deal of dedication to care for all of the animals that live on the farm.

The school's Web site summarizes the boys' experiences on the farm, "The boys learn that these chores must be done (even if they don't feel like doing them) because the animals depend on

them. The experience students obtain while having someone trust you and want to be your friend (no matter what your hair looks like or what kind of clothes you're wearing) is immeasurable. All that the animals require is for someone to be their friend, in return for a little love and kindness."

The Underhills

Pat has a background of working with youth and agriculture. Prior to moving to New Hampshire, she was a 4-H agent in Wisconsin. The Underhills share a strong commitment to helping the students and have a love for the cattle industry.

"Hugh and I had our own farm with a small herd of registered Holsteins for 20 years. We did a lot of marketing, embryo work and showing," Pat says. "In about 1992, the school asked us if we would participate in their community service program by allowing a student to come work with us for a half day each week. That was successful, and pretty soon there were two or three students wanting to come."

The following year Pat and Hugh joined the school staff and started having students at their farm for a full day, five days a week, to help with chores and daily activities.

"We used to have many foreign visitors and hosted a number of tours, so the students would help wash cows and get the barn ready," Pat says. "It was a wonderful way to show kids that farms and cattle had a bigger impact than just producing milk or meat, and they met many interesting people."

In 1998 Pat and Hugh had a chance to expand their dairy herd by selling an interest in the herd to a retired businessman and moving the herd about 30 miles south to a brand new facility. "We had to leave our position with the school since the distance prevented students from coming to help us each day," Pat says. In 2003 the Underhills sold their interest in the farm and moved back near the school.

"We still wanted to farm in some way — we just couldn't live without cows," she explains.

The Underhills reconnected with the school and took over the management of the school farm and the beef herd. Pat says at that time the herd consisted of about 20 Gelbviehs,

We seek to inspire our students to achieve, in their own unique and personal way, meaningful success. We do not define success for our students; they must do this themselves — with our guidance and the guidance of others whom they love and respect.

— John J. Wolter, Becket Family of Services founder

seven Scottish Highlands and 14 miniature Herefords.

"Since most of our kids have no farm background, the horned Highlands really freaked them out, so those cattle were sold," Pat says.

Building the herd

As farm managers, the Underhills' goal is to maintain herd numbers while working to improve the herd, and they hope to someday provide all the meat for the school system.

When they started working for the school, it already had a herd of miniature Herefords, but they wanted to start a registered Hereford herd. "In this situation Herefords are the best breed to work with," Pat says. "Disposition is very important."

In 2004 the school purchased the small, well-bred herd of polled Herefords developed by Fred Plaisted of Topsham, Vt. "We wanted to expand our herd in order to provide more beef for the school, and we wanted to bring new genetics into the miniature Hereford herd and the full-size polled cattle could do that as well as introduce the polled gene. We've found we can reduce the size by about half in the first generation."

Becket currently has about 21 registered Hereford cows and 50 miniatures, which is the largest herd of miniatures in the Northeast.

Working with the boys

Pat and Hugh work with the boys daily. "It is interesting, stimulating, frustrating, thrilling and maddening," Pat explains. "We deal with the influence of gangs, the results of abuse and dysfunctional families and effects of substance abuse."

But along with the challenges comes the joy of making a difference. "We also see the wonder on a kid's face when a calf is born, the satisfaction he feels when he can finally pound a nail or split firewood and the thrill of earning our trust enough for tractor driving lessons."

Herefords and other farm animals are great teachers, and their lessons are invaluable. Pat adds, "There is a lot of satisfaction in watching a boy go from being a tough know-it-all city kid with plenty of street smarts but no common sense to a responsible young man who can contribute to his community in a positive way." **HW**



At Becket schools, Herefords and other farm animals as well as land are used to teach young people the ethics of the workplace, the importance of community and the value of education. Pat Underhill, farm manager, says the two most important reasons the school has Herefords is "because of their great disposition and the fact they taste great."