



## The Republican.

### The benefits of nature

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Walnut tree branches bent with fruit encased in their light green shells hug the dirt road leading up to the white clapboard farmhouse where three black Australorp chickens peck at the ground.

Welcome to Red Gate, a 60-acre working farm tucked away in the tiny Franklin hilltown of Buckland (population about 1,990). It has another life as an educational nonprofit center, teaching mostly schoolchildren about a way of life they would not know about otherwise.

We are met on a warm summer day by Adrienne C. Shelton, who directs some of the programs at the farm.

What brings a young, college-educated, rubber boot-clad woman here?

"I love farming," she says, grinning. With an unusual degree from Providence College in public and community services studies, she has landed here because it obviously suits her.

The farm is host this lush, warm summer day to four boys who live in a group home in Springfield. The Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps White Street Group Home is for children who have behavioral issues. The field trip is designed to help them heal and grow by connecting with nature.

Today, nature stinks.

Roberto, 9, Justin, 11, Isacc, 10, and Jose, 10, have just been assigned the task of cleaning out the lambs' stall. It's been a month since fresh hay has been laid down, and the animals' refuse has found a pungent home beneath the bedding.

In addition to lambs, the farm has chickens, sheep, goats, ducks, organic gardens and hiking trails. Recently, Red Gate imported two 4-year-old oxen from Maine to work the farm and to show children how fields were plowed before tractors.

As the boys head toward the barn, they spy the oxen, which are emerging, in fits and starts, from a reclining position. The boys afraid to get too chummy with the massive, 4,000-pound animals. But gingerly, Isacc steps closer, enticed by Ben Murray, director of Red Gate, who explains how the animals get flies off their bodies and how you should stay away from their massive hooves so you don't get accidentally stepped on. Isacc reaches out to stroke one ox, murmuring, "I like to touch them."

The boys can't stall any longer. The time has arrived for real farm work - cleaning out poop.

"There's a lot of it in there," Shelton announces as the boys trudge toward the barn. The boys look at each

other, anticipating the worst.

She hands out rakes, shovels and picks. At first, the boys are hesitant, but their bodies loosen as they dig in, first raking, then heaving old straw outside the stall. The pace quickens as they lose themselves in the task, sensing that they're doing something good for the animals.

As the work winds down, Justin, who's been quiet until now, surveys the status of the stall. Unimpressed, he grabs a push broom and begins to meticulously sweep out the last stray bits of straw.

Sandra E. Johnson is the program director of the Kennedy White Street Group Home. She is accompanying the boys today and explains that one of the reasons they make this opportunity available to troubled youngsters is that "it exposes them to something they're not typically exposed to and it makes them feel good about volunteering.

"These farm encounters work because there is an exchange of unconditional love. These kids are drawn to animals.," she says.

The Robert F. Kennedy Action Corps was founded in 1969 as a living, active memorial to the work and principles of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. In 1973, when Massachusetts closed the state-run juvenile correctional facilities, it entrusted private organizations with the responsibility of rehabilitating the state's delinquent youth. Now the agency serves children who have psychological, emotional or behavioral problems. It partners with several state agencies, including the Department of Youth Services and the Juvenile Courts, Department of Social Services and others.

Boys in the Springfield group home are 9 to 13 years old and can stay as long as 2 years although the average is less, Johnson says. Most are victims of abuse and neglect.

During their stay, the staff commits to reconnecting each one with their families, if possible. But a lot of change must take place before that happens with both the children and parents, working to improve their behavior and parenting skills. To foster reconnection, regular, supervised visits with parents are commonplace. Those visits can last from one hour to an overnight at the parental home, Johnson says.

"We are heavily in case management," says Johnson, "keeping the family involved, advocating for each child in the school system and getting therapy for them."

At the farm, the corps' philosophy is further put into action as one of its goals is to help rebuild children's self-esteem and to help them become productive members of society. Farmers these boys may not become, but the field trip is largely successful because the boys listen, cooperate and are engaged. They must earn the privilege of being here. No one is allowed who cannot follow rules and who cannot control himself.

Before the trip, the boys learn about safety, teamwork, what they hope to get out of it.

"We expect everyone to listen and to be respectful," Johnson says.

While the boys often don't understand why they must live in a group home, Johnson says controlling anger and learning new behaviors is a must.

"Mostly it's anger management," Johnson says. "Some of these kids have had no discipline, no structure in their young lives."

A bit of that anger erupted when the boys began to weed one of the organic gardens at Red Gate. As they half-heartedly tug at some grass crowding in the okra, Justin and Jose break out in an argument. They're separated and Justin, the bigger boy, finds a large rock in the field where he secludes himself and settles into a lotus position.

He's learned how to separate himself to forestall any escalation of the argument, Johnson says approvingly.

It's an important tool for Justin, who's been separated from his mother for about a year and yearns to return home. Johnson says both he and his mother need to do more work before that can happen.

Situation now calm, the boys return to the gardening task.

"Can you guys guess why we weed?" Shelton asks them. She patiently points out which green shoots are the weeds and which plants need to stay in the ground.

"Is this poison ivy?" someone asks. No, she says, just weeds. She urges them to take a taste of the grass. "It's sweet," Roberto says.

They spy a spider. "Is that a tarantula?!" one shrieks. "Eeww, bugs are nasty."

Too much nature, and "gardening" is soon abandoned.

Just before leaving, the boys get a little less structured time, hanging out with the farm's chickens. The chickens scatter as the boys run to catch them but only after Shelton shows them how to gently hold them.

"I wanna touch them," Roberto yells. "I think that's Squawker!"

Roberto is the outgoing one. He sidles up to a reporter and announces he likes it here at the farm because "You get to help people out and you get to play with the chickens.

"I like work - just to help the animals feel better."

"I like the lettuce here, too ... and the lamb - it's soooo furry."

It's almost time to go. An hour and a half of freedom, helping and frolicking with the animals goes by quickly.

The boys wash their hands at the old spigot and climb back into the waiting van. Swimming is next on the day's agenda. Then home away from home, for now.