

# KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

## A day on the farm

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As Tony Kaufman led a group of fourth-graders from one pasture to another, a little girl tugged at his jacket sleeve.

“Tony,” she asked, “Do you watch Animal Planet?”

He said he sometimes watches the popular cable channel dedicated to all types of animals.

“But you’re living it right now,” he said. “This is Animal Planet.”

Excited, the girl scampered off in search of cows, goats, snakes, bugs or whatever other animals awaited them within the more than 300 acres of Lake Village Homestead. Kaufman, a farm manager, watched, knowing that for many of these children, the only place they experience tall grass, muddy swamps and all their creatures is on television.

For five years, students from Woodward Elementary for Technology and Research have run through the fields, milked goats and collected eggs at Lake Village Homestead, a nonprofit farm, collective and learning center on Long Lake in Pavilion Township. This past year, Woodward has stepped up its involvement with Lake Village, sending every student from every grade to the farm for a day, said Beth Yankee, Woodward’s principal.

“Children need to be connected with nature,” she said. “They need to have free exploration and play in a safe environment.”

Yankee said students learn a lot running around with bugs, rolling over logs and skipping stones. Jataun Fields’ fourth-graders did all those things and more when they visited the farm May 20. Throughout the day, the kids explored the swamps, fields and woods around the farm, drove cattle from one pasture to another, rode a horse and milked a goat.

For many of the students, this was their second or third time visiting Lake Village Homestead, and

Kaufman said he could already see a bond forming between the kids and the land. After tumbling off the big yellow school bus, the kids rode on a hay wagon to the edge of a large pasture. When Kaufman told the wagon full of kids they could get out and run, they bolted. Many congregated around an old apple tree standing in the middle of the field.

“Where are the apples?” several of the students asked.

The students had visited the farm in the fall and remembered harvesting apples under the tree. Now, they wondered where the apples went. Kaufman took the opportunity to teach the kids how fruit grows, starting as small buds before bursting into delicious apples. The kids spent a few moments scanning the tree for buds for future apples.

“It gave them a bond to a real natural thing of where their food comes from,” Kaufman said.

Roger Ulrich started Lake Village Homestead 38 years with that purpose in mind, to connect people back to the environment and land from where their food comes. The organization primarily self-funded and with little assistance from grants or foundations, has always worked with school-aged children, as Ulrich believes that the bonds with the earth must be formed at that age. The farm offers the students a chance to experience education instead of passively learning from books, computer screens and blackboards, Ulrich said.

Fields said she tied in lessons from Lake Village into her teaching throughout the year. When the students came out in the fall, it was right after a section on the environment, and surrounded by fresh air, grass, water and animals at Lake Village, the topics they learned about in the classroom came alive, Fields said. During the rest of the year, Fields brought up experiences from Lake Village and related it to the lesson of the day. Ulrich said learning experiences like Lake Village Homestead stick with the students.

“To understand the truth, they have to live it,” Ulrich said. “There’s a progression of trying to marry the education institution to its hard-core roots, which are back on the earth again.”

Yankee and Kaufman said the experiences on the farm already have changed the way some students view their food. Yankee said the school decided to partner with Lake Village years ago as part of commitment to teaching the importance of

locally grown organic food to Woodward's students.

Many of the students live in the city and come from low-income backgrounds. Their opportunities to play in nature and enjoy its fresh foods are limited. Yankee acknowledged that outdoor education has become a hot topic with buzz phrases like "no child left inside." But for Yankee, the need was alarming. Some students had no idea from where the food they ate came.

"It's not enough for kids to think that eggs come from the Easter Bunny ... or that milk comes from Meijer," she said. "Many Americans are so disconnected from their food. They think it comes from Meijer or Felpausch."

Kaufman tried to drive home the connection between the animals on the farm and the food on kitchen tables as the kids rode the hay wagon out of the pastures. A group of cows had gathered along a fence row, and Kaufman stopped the wagon nearby so the kids could thank the cows for hamburgers, milk and cheese.

"Cows give you food and nutrients and energy, and they give you milk," said Raymond Hayes, 11, when asked what he learned during his first trip to the farm.

Students had other hands-on experiences with food that day. Some of the students collected eggs from the chicken coop; most milked a goat. And at lunch, goat's milk was served. Some sampled it, and some liked it, like Kenneth Birch who went up for second and third helpings. Others were not fans.

"Goat's milk is nasty," said Tyra Wilk-Williams, 10. "It's too warm."

Even though Tyra would not give the goat's milk a second try, she did gather the courage to ride a horse. She had never been atop a horse before, and when Liz Farner, a pediatrician studying the therapeutic effects of farming on children at the farm, offered her a ride on Aries, a tall white steed, she was scared. The fear quickly faded after the first few gaits.

"I hope I get to ride on it twice. That was fun," she said.

Unfortunately, she did not. Time quickly ran out on the fourth-graders day at the farm. Early in the afternoon, they piled back into the school bus and headed for school. The learning will continue, as Fields' students spent the next days writing and reflecting on their experiences.

Yankee, Kaufman, Farner, Ulrich and the rest of the people at Lake Village Homestead hope the time spent in the fields, woods, swamps, pens and coops will stick with the kids for a long time.

"It makes a dent, but one day on the farm isn't going to do it," Ulrich said.

However, thanks to one baby calf, one day might be enough.

Early in the day, a few students ran into a field ahead of Kaufman and Farner, who held back to wrangle stragglers. The group had already trekked about a mile or so through pastures and woods, and the activity had already taken its toll on some. Suddenly, the group of kids ran back to Kaufman, shouting about a downed calf they found in the next pasture. Many thought the calf, only about 12 hours old and a small black hump in the distance, was dead.

"My heart just dropped because I thought it was dead," said Asianah Carouthers, 10.

Kaufman cautiously approached the calf. For a long time, the calf did not move. Farner began to talk to some of the kids about life and death, and how sometimes baby animals are not strong enough to make it, but she was interrupted. The kids erupted in a cheer and started clapping as the baby calf stumbled to its feet and ran toward its mother hiding in some nearby trees.

Asianah said her heart jumped back up into her body when the calf stood up. Many children credited themselves with saving the calf's life and a bond was formed.

To learn more about Lake Village go to [www.lakevillagehomestead.org](http://www.lakevillagehomestead.org)