



Posted on Wed, Apr. 30, 2008

Fleming County students have a stable learning environment

By Amy Wilson

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FLEMINGSBURG — It is as normal a morning as mornings get in the ag barn at Fleming County High School, and suddenly someone yells, "Peanut is loose."

Like a well-oiled machine, students head off all the passes — the large front and back openings, the classroom door, the horse stalls. The lambs, which have been lying down, are standing up for the show. The calves moo in appreciation. The elder statesmen bunnies are way over on the other side of the barn and are used to these shenanigans by now.

• [Audio slide show](#)

Frankly, the pigs couldn't care less.

And Peanut, aka Whoopi Goldberg, the miniature horse with the wild tuft of unruly hair that no amount of tending, clipping or industrial-strength teenage-girl hair product can tame, is enjoying the freedom she has cleverly wheedled out of some unsuspecting beginning ag student who did not properly lock the pen.

Even Jim Tom Galbreath, who was about to show off his considerable harness driving skills on Pre, a former Red Mile regular, has to wait until Peanut is corralled by the girls to show that he is only a few years away from professional work himself.

Pre is unfazed. Peanut is pleased with herself, if now restrained. She is the babied horse here, the horse to be groomed for practice and kissed for good measure, though rarely worked too hard.

The other horses, who have been known to be kissed after grooming as well, do not seem to mind. They know they are a rare breed indeed. They are a select bunch of Kentucky work-horses.

Because they teach high school.

Forty years ago, Fleming County High School ag teacher Charles Berry went to Texas to take a look at agriculture programs there and noted that "they were doing all this stuff with horses and all we were teaching was livestock and tobacco."

That didn't make any sense to Berry, since he thought he was the one from the state that prided itself on its horses and, more importantly, from a state that had ready-made jobs for some of the kids he was teaching, jobs he could and should prepare them for.

It's been a long time in the making but Fleming County, as rural a high school as high schools come in Kentucky, has become the leader in innovative equine education in the commonwealth.

"It is the most full-blown of all our equine programs," says Curt Lucas, Kentucky Department of Education Career and Technology consultant for agricultural programs. "Others may have a few horses on hand but Fleming County has, without question, the most extensive facilities of any school farm or school lab anywhere in the state."

No place he'd rather be

As many as 20 horses wait for 17-year-old Eugene Hamilton to bring them food and water and a businesslike hello. He isn't paid and wants to be a mechanic or an air conditioning man later on but he likes horses and he's a hard worker. No, ma'am, he's not paid, he just likes being outside and he'd rather be in this barn than just about anywhere else.

The freshmen in first block will come down shortly to the barn and muck, put new bedding in the stalls, groom the horses like they've been taught. Some upperclassmen will also be there to tell them when something might feel good to a horse and something might just be irritating. Might want to avoid the latter.

Some of these kids have grown up on horses. Some of them are in the barn all the time. Some, like Chelsey Vise and Alonna Crawford, seniors and off to Morehead to major in either equine science or veterinary science, say these classes have only served to strengthen their resolve to never be out of the sight of a horse.

Aaron Collins, 16, is a practical kid. He says his uncle works cleaning out horse stalls and figures he might get to work with him some day — "that's what's in Kentucky." A job is a good thing. Still, he's not all that fond of horses, he admits. "Pigs are all right."

All the horses are geldings — except for Peanut and an old mare named Mabel — and they are older, excessively gentle horses. Most are on loan from a local summer resort, D&H Western Village, which caters to campers and summer visitors who like to horseback and trail ride through the Daniel Boone National Forest. These horses, then, are used to different riders daily and are proven troopers. It's a perfect arrangement, says D&H owner Steve Dobson, who also brings down all his tack.

"The horses get cared for and ridden in winter and I don't have to worry about them."

The kids who ride them come in after lunch. Having already done the book work necessary — having studied the science, the anatomy, the breeds, the bones, the digestion, the reproduction and the temperament — they are introduced to the real-life, in-the-flesh animal. Many of these kids, says equine specialist Anne Clark, know horses or other animals, but many don't. So she puts them in teams of two and assigns them a horse for the day.

No one is made to ride, says Clark. But they are made to muck and groom.

"You will touch a horse," she says. "That would be the point."

But those who do ride will start out in a lunging ring and eventually move on to take 30- and 45-minute rides on the campus grounds, past the football field, behind the horticulture greenhouse and over a grassy hill where hardly anything looks like high school.

Who pays for this?

Lest you think the ag department at Fleming County High School has forgotten its roots, let's review. In this barn are lambs, pigs, calves, bunnies and horses. And on this most normal of mornings, Anne Clark is showing kids how to properly measure and administer vaccine to 2-week-old calves. For every day those calves are bottle fed, the ag program earns \$1.

That is not to say that some animals are not owned by the kids.

Out of this barn for the past five years running has come the Grand Champion Steer at the Kentucky State Fair, courtesy of one student, Cody Emmons. The year before the Grand Champion string — that was 2002 — he had the Reserve Champion. Out of this barn have come farriers, a skill Berry knew and passed along to the interested. Out of this barn has come every imaginable kind of students who seem never to have forgotten they were once in here.

That's how Berry and Clark explain how the whole equine program is paid for.

Seems there was the matter of building the barn.

With the help of (former) Agriculture Commissioner Billy Ray Smith and Speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives Jody Richards and the abilities of Anne Clark to write a mighty convincing grant application, the school received \$125,000 to get the ball rolling. The Fleming County School Board got equally enthused when they saw what was happening and threw in another \$125,000. The vocational departments did their part with the carpentry, welding and drafting classes doing what they could and "everything else was done or donated by students or former students," says Berry, "except the inspection, and that was done by a guy who was married to a former student."

The hitch to this is no funds that the school boards gives them can be used to feed the animals. So the kids must earn that.

And there is no going door-to-door selling candles. It all must be work that relates back to the work of a real farm.

They have baled hay, built fences, planted 6,800 trees, landscaped, hand-fed calves for farmers in Fleming County. All to put \$15,000 worth of food, medicine and the occasional sack of peppermints on their teachers' desk.

She comes in peace

Emily Virgin purposely signed up for equine science because she is afraid of horses. She has been all her life. She seems to have good reason. She says she's been "squashed across gates by them, smashed against tree branches and penned against fences. I don't trust them. They could hurt me."

And yet she would like to make peace with them.

Ben is her olive branch. He is probably the oldest horse here. He has curly hair, which puts him of some unknown origin, maybe a Friesian. He's large but not scarily so. "He's old and slow and pretty," says Emily.

"He does not go above a really slow walk."

She will never know what it feels like to ride him because she has no intention of doing so.

She is here to simply "get myself over it."

"It's a personal challenge," she says, brushing Ben all the while, small against his largeness, pale against his darkness.

"Plus I love this barn."

It is hard to believe something this good has anything to do with high school.

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