

Our Towns | Andrew H. Malcolm

On a day in the country, everything fresh, including perspectives.



Alan Zale for The New York Times

Wendy Dubit, with bucket, founder of Farm Hands-City Hands, feeding sheep at Ryder Farms in Brewster, N.Y., with a group of children visiting from New York City for the day.

BREWSTER, N.Y.

"Wow!" said the boy from the Bronx. "Look at this!"

"Uh-huh," said the adult from Connecticut. "It's a leaf."

"No. I mean how big it is."

It was indeed larger than the youngster's head, as are most sycamore leaves. And the youngster ran off to announce this new-found knowledge to his buddies from the city. "It's a sick more," he said.

A small lesson in perspective, perhaps, for both the city child and the suburban man. And an appropriate symbol for Farm Hands-City Hands, an unusual program founded by a suburban woman with the slogan, "New York City — Love It and Leave It."

Wendy Dubit grew up in the suburbs of Washington when strip malls still faced working farms. For her, choosing to hang around a corn farm instead of a 7-Eleven was easy. Next, the freelance writer found herself living in a Manhattan apartment above subway lines and a reggae lounge, which she heard only late at night

when her earplugs fell out. By day, she often visited Union Square's Greenmarket and was soon volunteering as a harvest hand.

From this seed grew Ms. Dubit's nonprofit organization that matches city residents to country residents for daylong or overnight visits. The farmers — about 150 a year — get free labor, good company and interesting questions ("Aren't you scared living all alone out here?") and the city residents — maybe 1,000 a year — get new friends, a healthy outing with fresh foods and some interesting questions ("Aren't you scared living with all those other people in there?").

Ms. Dubit's taken city people pumpkin-hunting, dahlia-bulb-digging, brush-clearing, raspberry-picking, flower-collecting, jam-making and storytelling. She's played host to corporate executives, fabric sales clerks, United Nations delegates, abused children, battered women and ordinary city families who don't mind getting their cross-trainers a little muddy and, for a few hours, breathing air they cannot see.

The city has pizza. But the country has space and stillness.

"It's so exciting when you see a light go on and a link is made," Ms. Dubit said.

The latest thrust for Farm Hands-City Hands is to have corporations sponsor outings of employees' families to coincide with visits by poor city youngsters. "That way we double the links made," said Ms. Dubit.

About 20 employees and family members of Martin Scott Wines Ltd. visited a farm. The company also underwrote the day for 10 Bronx youngsters. After cider and pumpkin fritters, Ms. Dubit established the visit's ground rules: No television or video games. Minor groans. Then came garden protocol: Do not walk on the plants, apparently a difficult concept. "Just pretend the path is a sidewalk," urged Ms. Dubit. That worked better.

"Now this," said Ms. Dubit, "is parsley."

"This is?" said one child.

"No," said the hostess. "That's the sign for parsley. This is parsley. Now, taste this other plant."

"Spaghetti!" yelled Michael Normoyle, who is 9 years old.

"Close," said Ms. Dubit. "It's oregano."

Next it was time to feed the ducks, chickens and pigs; to milk the goats, and to watch Roy, the border collie, work the sheep herd. "He's really smart," said Geraldo Adames, who is 8. Then it was time to pick raspber-

ries for jam, although the field's length was more suggestive of football to many boys. That game evolved into a berry fight while nearby, John Bruno, a wine salesman from Elmwood Park, N.J. was picking berries and singing in a downpour.

While socks dried by the fire, there was a lunch of breads and salad, cheeses, punch and a large serving of understanding. "It's nice and quiet here," said James Davis, an 11-year-old Bronx native who said he'd been out of the city once, to visit Queens.

On his arrival, Geraldo had announced that he much preferred the city "because you can get pizza there." But midafternoon the young man favored the country "because if you go out, there's not so many people to steal you."

"Next year," said Scott Gerber, vice president of Martin Scott, "we'd like to sponsor some more city kids." His own suburban children, Nicole, 6, and Robin, 8, had learned by touch that wool does not grow in the shape of sweaters in stores. "The sheep were all wet," explained Nicole.

On the back porch everyone lavished pats on Onyx, a patient Great Dane the size of a small car. "Boy," said William Foster, who is 11, "I wish I was a dog to get that attention." The crowd paused, then swarmed around William for big hugs.

Indoors, a 3-year-old suburban youngster and an 8-year-old Bronx boy had become fast friends. The 3-year-old white child touched his black friend's cheek. "Soft," said the toddler.

The 8-year-old stroked the little boy's cheek. "You're soft, too," he said.

Then they went home.



FarmHands-CityHands is an organization dedicated to keeping local agriculture alive and to linking farm and city for the social, cultural, environmental and economic enrichment of both. For information on upcoming FarmDay field trips and festivals, or to have a FarmDay customized for your corporation or group, please e-mail wendy@vergant.com or call 212.873.8158.



LINKING FARM AND CITY

