

Cows, corn and kittens - a Fresh Air child's view of rural living

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LITITZ - They come from a different world - a world of concrete and brick and green grass, found mostly in parks. For the nearly 600 children who visit Lancaster County through the auspices of the Fresh Air Fund, it is not just a vacation, but an opportunity to see a different way of life.

The J. Wilmer Conrad family on Newport Road near Lititz has hosted a Fresh Air child for the past five years. They first became involved when someone asked them to host, and they have welcomed the children back each year.

For the first time, they have just one child visiting. Dennis Torres, 11, is back for his fifth year, and becomes ever more at home each year. According to Rhelda Conrad, they usually host a girl, Charmaine Stephenson, as well but this year she was unable to come.

The visit proves to be educational both for the visitors and for the Conrad children, Lisa, 14, and Michael, 11.

For Dennis, the Conrad dairy farm offers a complete contrast to life in his third floor apartment in New York City. In fact, he says, "I like living in a house."

Dennis hails from the Bronx and said he goes to the park when he wants to play outside.

He says he doesn't have a favorite job on the farm, but helps to sweep the barn and feed the cows. He has also helped with loading the straw wagon. The Conrads milk about 50 Holsteins, but Dennis does not help with milking chores. He does like drinking the milk, however, and he likes telling his friends about the animals.

It is the animals that Dennis enjoys most, and he says, "I thought they would be bigger." He finds the many kittens on the farm intriguing, and he'd like to find a way to take one home to New York.

Although host families are encouraged to follow their usual routine, Rhelda says she likes to plan a few special activities during the children's stay. They will try to go miniature golfing and do some "special evening things." A treat for Dennis is going to the pool with his host family.

Foods are often different for the children who come from New York City, and Rhelda says she has finally accepted the fact that Dennis is a picky eater. Dennis couldn't really give a favorite food, but he did observe, "I hate beans."

He chooses to have raisin bran cereal for breakfast and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. If he really doesn't like the main course, Rhelda said she allows him to have peanut butter sandwiches instead. He did admit to liking Lancaster County's delicious sweet corn.

Rhelda says, "We really are happy we became involved in the program. Every year it gets easier." She said her one continuing concern is the responsibility she feels in caring for someone else's child. This responsibility is compounded on the farm, because she says, "He is not used to the dangers." However, after five visits, Dennis is becoming accustomed to what is allowed and what is not allowed.

Another great joy for Dennis and for his host brother Michael is riding bicycles, something they do continually throughout the day. And the tire swing in the yard gets a lot of use as they gleefully try to get each other to fall off. Lisa says somewhat wistfully, "I'm very disappointed that Charmaine couldn't come."

Rhelda said they are learning from each other. She said Dennis has told them they have no screens in the windows, and have no need because they have so few flies.

She said she usually corresponds a few times throughout the year, and Lisa and Charmaine continue to write.

According to Rhelda, two weeks is a nice amount of time to host, although it always is difficult to find a two-week period when their life is not filled with other activities.

Kathryn Zug is the chairman of the Lititz area Fresh Air Committee and has been a host herself for 25 years. She can still remember her own mother hosting a Fresh Air child when she was 16. Because of her own involvement, she is sold on the value of the program.

It is her job to find host families for her area, a job which is becoming more difficult primarily



Lisa and Michael Conrad share their guests' love of the kittens on the farm. Here they pay special attention to the kittens as they play together on the lawn.

because so many women are now working full time. She said part of the aim of the program is to put them in families where they can see "how mothers and fathers live together." Therefore, they don't want to place children in homes where they will be with babysitters.

Kathryn explained that many of the children in the program come from one parent homes, and they like to have them participate in a different environment. She said, "Many of the children have working mothers who don't want them on the streets in the summer."

The majority of the children who participate are Spanish or Black, and they come from all the boroughs of New York City. The program operates for periods of two, four or six weeks, depending upon how long families wish to host the children. Most keep them for just two weeks, because of family obligations, vacations, and other activities.

The largest group of children arrives in the first caravan of six buses from New York, and they fan out in the county to a wide diversity of families, including many Amish homes. In the 106 years of operation, the Fresh Air Fund now has children in 13 states from Maine to Virginia. Kathryn said Lancaster was one of the first counties to work with the program, and Lititz was one of the first areas to participate.

Kathryn began hosting when her daughter was six, and she and her husband, Clair, continued until their daughter was 16. After that they always hosted two children so they would have playmates. She now invites a grandchild to her home during the visit from a Fresh Air child. Children may participate from age five through the year they are 16.

Kathryn said she corresponds with the children she hosted, and continues to be in touch with the child who stayed in her home when she was a child.

New families are always being sought, as others need to drop out. Kathryn said she puts information in local church bulletins and weekly papers. Because of all the publicity about child abuse, she now must interview potential host families and get references.

In case of difficulties which arise in any program involving that many people, it is Kathryn who works out the problems, occasionally needing to find a new host family for a child. She said for the most part it is a positive experience both for the hosts and the visitors.

When asked what qualities host

families need, Kathryn replies, "Patience. And we tell them to give them all the love you can."

She has traveled to New York to help bring the children to Lancaster and she said sometimes the tears "are very pathetic," when the parents bring the children to George Washington station to board the buses. Usually they

subside once the children are underway, and then the tears sometimes return when they are ready to leave Lancaster to return to New York after their visit. She adds, "Homesickness is sometimes a problem, especially if families are very close."

Often host families have the

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Homestead Notes



Dennis doesn't help to milk the cows, but he helps to drink the milk. Here Rhelda pours him a tall glass of milk as he takes time out from playing with the Conrad children.



Wilmer Conrad shows his Fresh Air Fund guest, Dennis Torres, how to feed a calf. The animals on this dairy farm near Lititz are one of the biggest attractions for 11-year-old Dennis.