

SATURDAYS ON THE FARM FOR KIDS

by Diane Holcomb

A timid child gapes at a series of small waterfalls on the Bunny Loop Trail and imagines standing on the very top. She is one of a dozen youngsters, aged six to ten, participating in *Saturdays on the Farm for Kids*, a three-week program offered in the fall and spring at Hidden Villa. Suddenly, she bounds from boulder to boulder until she reaches her destination and then waves her arms to those below. Her fellow adventurers eagerly follow. With the encouragement and assistance from guides William Mutch and Greg Stevens, these children, who thought they couldn't master the ascent, successfully meet the challenge.

"We're helping to create nostalgic memories for the kids," Greg says, his cherub face beaming. It was nostalgia that brought him back to Hidden Villa years after his initial field trip as a third-grader from La Loma School in Menlo Park. "I never forgot the experience."

Greg and William met during the summer of '96 while working for Hidden Villa's Summer Camp as program head and counselor, respectively. It was William's third year as a camp staffer, and he seized the opportunity to lead *Saturdays on the Farm for Kids* as "...a chance to extend the summer camp experience throughout the year."

The guides have different leadership styles, and the kids are drawn to one or the other. William's calm voice and patient demeanor balances Greg's energetic, fun-loving nature.

"When asked how I teach," William explains, "I say I hang out with the kids and we learn from each other."

"It's a symbiotic thing," Greg says. "It's wonderful to see kids fascinated by a cluster of newt eggs in the pond, or a trapdoor spider, or getting a chance to be close to the animals. It's an opportunity to live vicariously through them."

They both believe that, for a child, the experience of being with an adult who is willing to sit down and talk face-to-face, who listens and respects their viewpoint, can create tremendous change. They also agree that it's important to take time out to be goofy.

"Why does a chicken coop have two doors?" Greg asks the group. They all shrug. "If it had four doors it would be a chicken sedan." The kids erupt with peals of laughter.

In the first week of the program, children interact with the animals. They groom the cows and goats, and spread mud on the pigs for protection against sunburn. They learn to respect the animals and discover how each species communicates in a different language.

On the second week, the group participates in a garden project, cultivating a section of land or digging up beds. A community atmosphere develops, one child leaping to the assistance of another who struggles with a tough weed. They learn that the people places in the garden are hard so we can walk on them, and the plant places are soft so plants can grow.

The kids take to the trails for the final week, playing trust games, painting their faces with stones, and walking alone in the wilderness to experience the solitude and beauty of nature. They learn Frank Duveneck's philosophy: if all these different species of trees, animals, and birds can live together in a harmonious fashion, people certainly can too.

When asked about their future goals, Greg, a high school world studies teacher, shares his vision of developing an environmental education program for disadvantaged youth. William, currently enrolled in a master's program in transpersonal psychology, plans to be involved in environmental and cultural education.

In a generous gesture, Greg and William offered their salaries as guides to set up a scholarship fund. As a result, four children from East Palo Alto attended the program last spring. "It feels terrific being able to provide this experience for kids who might not otherwise have the opportunity," Greg says.

Opportunities like scaling a waterfall.

The twelve youngsters at the top are impatient to move on now, eager to explore more of the wonders of nature before it's time to return home.

To learn more about Saturday on the Farm for Kids, or to contribute to the scholarship fund, please contact Hidden Villa's Community Program at 650-949-8653.