

The snorts and whinnies that greet the arriving students at Little Brook Farm in Old Chatham, NY indicate the horses are happy to see their young visitors.

“Look at the horses. There’s a horse. I want that horse,” exclaim the 7 year old students from the John L. Edwards School in Hudson. They begin their visit by watching Summer Brennan put her horse Hamlet, over a few jumps.

Hamlet is one of 60 horses that live on the farm. Each one was rescued from a situation that could have ended at a slaughterhouse.

Summer Brennan explains why the school kids always start their visit by watching a demonstration of horsemanship. Summer said, “We try to demonstrate correct riding. So we show basic position and gaits of the horse.”

As she rides Hamlet in a collected canter, her mother and Little Brook Farm owner Lynn Cross asks the children, “how many beats does the canter have?” The children counted the three beats of the canter and cry in unison, “Three.”

The horsemanship demonstration worked like magic. Every child wanted to ride. But tears flowed when one little girl learned she would not be allowed to jump a horse. She explained through tears that she is “not scared of jumping.”

Volunteers from as far away as Cazenovia College, made sure the students’ first rides were anything but scary!

In addition to the ponies, a dozen of the rescued horses under the care of Little Brook Farm are thoroughbreds, including a mare named Angel. Summer says she didn’t look like much when she first arrived. “When we got her off the trailer we thought this one’s a train wreck.” But, with loving care, Angel, became Summer’s favorite mount.

It is lessons about kindness towards animals that the farm slips in as the children learn about grooming ponies and providing clean stalls for the equine residents.

Farm owner Lynn Cross says, “I want my voice to be the voice they (the students) hear when interacting with animals in terms of being responsible, compassionate.”

She notes that some of the children come from pretty tough situations. But then, so do some of the people that have passed through Little Brook’s program, including Shawn Hinkle who says “I’d be if I hadn’t come here. It teaches a good work ethic and care for another person or volunteer.”

Shawn was an overweight 9<sup>th</sup> grader when he dropped out of Albany High School and moved full time to the farm. His mother approved as Shawn immediately started to work on his GED and began college course work when he was just 16 and a half.

Now, 22, Shawn has a college degree but still returns to Little Brook Farm as a volunteer when school kids visit.

They ended this visit with a final lesson from Cross about the importance of respecting nature. Standing in a hay field at the top of a hill overlooking the farm, she asks the children to "be absolutely quiet and tell me what you hear."

They hear birds chirping and Cross informs them the fields provide habitat for some special song birds, so they won't be mowed until the young birds have flown the nest.

As the students head back to their bus, Lynn Cross says she hopes that the seeds of respect for horses and green space will take root in all of them.

She's sure that some of them will return to her farm, to make the kind of lasting connection that keeps people like Shawn volunteering year after year, to help the mission of Little Brook Farm to inspire respect for horses and green space in people of all ages.