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STUDENTS BOND WITH FUR, FLEECE, AND FEATHERS

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The 152 special education students at the ANDRUS Children's Center sometimes struggle with social interaction, but not with the six goats, three alpacas, three sheep, 15 chickens, and three dogs who share the 110-acre campus on the border with Hastings and Yonkers.

The Property, which was once a working farm, still has paddocks, animal sheds, fruit trees, and fields of fragrant lavender. It's an idyllic place that serves as a haven for children suffering from problems stemming from complex trauma, as well as those on the autism spectrum. For them, the animals serve a therapeutic purpose that can be duplicated in a classroom or a psychologist's office.

Dogs are known to have a calming benefit for everyone but especially for trauma survivors or people with autism. Teddy, a Golden Retriever, and Rocky, a black Labrador Retriever, act as therapy dogs in the school building and residential cottages. A 'hypoallergenic' coated dog named Loula works in the mental health clinic. The dogs go home with staff members at night.

Farm animals take animal-assisted therapy to another level. Eric Osterman, Associate Vice President of Campus Programs, said the initiative started seven years ago when a benefactor donated three sheep named Molly, Dolly, and Lolly. "We were aware of the research and looking to move into it," Osterman said. Once the woolly trio arrived and the students began visiting them, "We saw the impact immediately and looked to expand the program."

The African Pygmy Goats, which are about as large as medium size dogs, soon took up residence in the same paddock as the sheep. Their size and sweet disposition made them popular right away. Naturally sociable, the goats helped the students improve their own social skills.

"Animals will show unconditional affection. They show no bias," Osterman said. "It is a great way to help the child open up."

Allison Ratner, ANDRUS' animal assisted therapy coordinator, was formerly a preschool teacher and now welcomes classes of students who learn about the animals, and other students help her out individually. All 152 students interact with the animals formally or informally.

Ratner has a soft spot for the goats. "We bottle-raised them -- they were about 2 weeks old when we got them," she said. "They're very comfortable around the kids." The goats have distinct personalities and, she said "The goats have their favorite kids and the kids have their favorite goats."

The presence of animals has helped the students control their own behavior. Osterman explained that the K-12 school on campus, The Orchard School, is a special education private school serving both boarding and day students. "Their home schools don't have the resources we have here. The students have very low frustration tolerance; they become disregulated. During the day, if they maintain their regulation they earn the right to work with Allison. It gives them a sense of hope and ownership of the space. They know they have an obligation to do the work because the animals are counting on them." He added that any time of the day, a student who needs a break, can visit the animals, accompanied by an adult.

Three years ago ANDRUS acquired the three alpacas, Zingaro, Amadeo, and Phoenix, who have their own shady shed and paddock. The alpacas are about 6ft tall, with long necks, melting eyes, a sweet expression, and an interest in people. Alpacas are gentler and friendlier than their larger cousins, llamas. The students can step into the alpaca paddock, where there is a bench and reading material. "Sometimes they'll read with the alpacas. Sometimes they paint with the alpacas," Ratner said.



As she spoke, a 14-year old boarding student who is one of Ratner's frequent helpers went into the chicken coop to retrieve eggs. The excited chickens clustered together waiting for something to happen. The teen then visited his favorites, the goats. "They are fun and cuddly," he explained as he nuzzled and chatted with Caleb, the oldest billy goat of the group. All the goats are curious, and Caleb is especially fond of nibbling on visitors' shirts, a habit that this student did not discourage.

"It's a lot easier for a child, whether they have a complex trauma, or autism, to connect with one of the animals than with an adult," Osterman said.

The farm provides refuge for the staff at ANDRUS as well as the students. Each student and staff member has a "safety plan" - what to do when they feel emotionally overloaded, which is not uncommon among adults who work with special-needs children. "One of the staff, a psychiatrist, has a safety plan that included visiting the goats," Osterman said.