

education

Kinderfarm

Simple pleasures for preschoolers

By Jen Knights

Ask Heather Shoemaker what's special about Kinderfarm Preschool, located on 20 acres of farmland just east of Iowa City, and she can gush for an hour.

Shoemaker, the owner and director of Kinderfarm (not to mention occasional cook, driver and all-around go-to gal), says that the school "gives kids more for their imagination." It gets children outside and gives them opportunities to experience the natural world in a time when video games, DVDs and computers make it easy for kids to be sedentary.

"In this modern life," she explains, "lots of kids miss the simple pleasures. Whether it's a tadpole swimming in the pond or a beautiful sunset, Kinderfarm kids understand the beauty of a simpler time — and they understand the importance of caring for the natural world."

Kinderfarm, founded in 1973 by Jim and Phyllis Tucker of Iowa City, was created during a time when more Iowa families lived on farms and when children had easier access to a farm experience. Even then, the exodus of families from the country to the city had begun, and large-scale farming had just started to take hold of the agricultural economy.

Today, Shoemaker and her husband, Drew, who purchased the business from the Tuckers in 1993, attempt to recapture the magic of the farm and to use its everyday events as teaching opportunities for budding young minds. Children help tend the animals on the farm, including rabbits, goats, chickens, llamas, a pot-bellied pig, a horse and a pony, as well as the Kinderfarm garden, which provides veggies for

some of the center's meals during the growing season.

"It's such a treat to watch a child taste a raw green bean for the first time," Shoemaker says. "You'd be surprised how many kids ask for another one!"

Kinderfarm isn't just a day at the farm, though. The center strives to balance unstructured play-time and free-form learning opportunities on the farm with structured classroom time spent learning school-readiness skills like socializing, decision-making, language proficiency, beginning math and early reading and writing. Classes occupy rooms of a turn-of-the-century farmhouse, retrooled to provide a homey learning environment where rooms are color-coded to help kids find their way. Lunches (usually prepared by Drew) are served at a round table in the kitchen, just like in the good old days.

It's easy to see why Kinderfarm is known for longevity — not just of the center itself, which is certainly one of the longest-running in the area, but also of its staff. Among its small staff are employees with tenures of 10, 12 and 14 years. "Our newbie has been here for four years," Shoemaker says with a laugh.

And because the preschool has been in operation for 35 years, some Kinderfarm parents today also are Kinderfarm alumni. They fondly remember their childhood years spent at the farm and want to give the same great experience to their children.

"We never run out of new things to explore because we incorporate all of the outdoors into our curriculum, all year round," Shoemaker says. "The kids have a blast, and we do, too!"

Learn more about Kinderfarm Preschool at kinderfarmpreschool.com.



Children ride a pony at Kinderfarm near Iowa City. (Photo courtesy of Kinderfarm)

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