

Iowa City pre-school of a different color



Preschool students in Donna Lehman's class at KinderFarm Early Childhood Learning Center listen to a story on Feb. 27. (The Daily Iowan/Jessica Payne)

By **LAUREN COFFEY**
lauren-n-coffey@uiowa.edu

Many children across the country sing the classic song "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" as they go about their normal preschool activities.

But at one local preschool, the children actually experience life on a farm.

The roughly 80 children in the KinderFarm Early Childhood Learning Center, 5048B Highway 6 S.E., experience all aspects of the farm, including feeding horses and chickens, taking care of a potbelly pig and a few llamas, and ice skating on a nearby pond.

Heather Norman, who has owned KinderFarm for the past 20 years, said she believes a preschool should not only teach the 3- to 5-year-old children academics but also help with their character.

"Just the concept of a preschool on a farm is unique," she said. "I don't think there is another program like this in the state or even the nation. Parents will send their kids here because they grew up on a farm or maybe had grandparents that had a farm and have fond memories and want their kids to have that as well."

KinderFarm will celebrate its 40th anniversary this coming fall.

A veterinarian at Creature Comfort Veterinary Center, 2122 ACT Circle, said working with the animals helps children develop real-world experience early in life.

"With a setting like KinderFarm, when you've got adult supervision and the adults know the temperament of the animals, having young children interact with the animals is OK," said Nadia VanderGaast, the owner of Creature Comfort. "It gives you some experience in the real world, and you don't get bogged down in video games, like so many kids do today."

KinderFarm is a technology-free facility, with no television or computers. The Normans hope to have a more simple approach to teaching, bringing the values back to when they were children.

This core philosophy causes some people, such as Katie Hemann-Rogers, to come back to KinderFarm and teach after being a student.

"I came here when I was in preschool, and it's a pretty incredible place," she said. "I think it's a good experience because it just lets them be kids."

The preschool offers

an integrated learning system rather than having a separate time slot for each subject, such as math or science. Norman and her husband, Jeff Norman, say this is much more effective in facilitating a child's learning.

"Our program is different from direct teaching; we have teachable moments throughout the day," Jeff Norman said. "We'll go see the chickens and ask how many of them are. Every study I read says that is the way you should teach kids. We've been doing that for 40 years; we know what we're doing is right, but it just validates it."

Heather Norman said the willingness to be flexible is what allows those "teachable moments" to happen.

"Most people are very routine-oriented," she said. "But sometimes you have to stop and take advantage of these perfect days where the snow is perfect for a snowball fight."

Moments such as these are what students, such as 4-year-old Alice Edelen of Iowa City, love most.

"I like my teacher because she lets the kids put snowballs on her," she said.

DANCING AROUND THE WORLD



Teams from across the country competed at the 11th Annual Nachte Raho, a South Asian Dance Competition hosted by the UI Indian Student Alliance in the IMU on March 2. Nine dance teams from across the country competed in three categories of Indian dance: Bollywood Fusion, Bhangra, and Garba-Raas. (The Daily Iowan/Adam Wesley)

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