

ON THE FARM

with Pete and Margie



5:45 AM. As they trudge towards the barns, the Barn Crew members are visible through steam rising from the manure pile. They look weary. (It is Project Week Spring '06, and the Damoclean sword of not-yet-culminated projects in theater, writing, religious studies, cultural studies, sculpture, dance, music, weaving, civilized conversation, image editing, and farming hangs over all heads.) The closer the students get to the barns, the more forcefully the air tells them that work lies ahead.

Still, no one holds their noses against the smell.

"Everyone gets used to it," Farm Manager Pete Stickney explains.

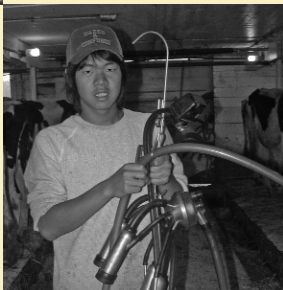
Twelve students are enough that most tasks get started simultaneously. Crew Heads

Robin Crofut-Brittingham '07 and Clara Rowe '07 dole out assignments, and as they do Robin and Tyler Rausch '06 accept compliments for last night's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Musical*. Jeffrey Bowman '09 and Dae Han Yu '09 set about milking. Carter Grickis '07 feeds calves. One or two students disappear into the small animal barn to work there. A few wheelbarrows of manure get carted to the pile. And, in the most droll tone he can muster, Arran Bardige '06 explains to everyone that, when a cow simultaneously urinates, gets milked, and eats (as the one nearest him is doing), she does not mean to be rude.

"I'm going to miss these guys this summer," Farm Manager Pete Stickney laughs. "I'll miss the great times and talks. And I'll miss them as workers. This summer Margie [Levine, assistant farm manager], Noah [Hoskins-Forsythe], Cara [Snarski] and a few extra hands will have to handle everything. We'll miss the students' help."



<top> **BRINGING THE COWS IN FOR MILKING.** <above> **ASSISTANT FARM MANAGER MARGIE LEVINE.** <right> **DAE HAN YU '09 GETS READY TO MILK A WHOLE BARN FULL OF COWS.** <below> **JOHANNA CASE '07 AND FRIENDS.**



THIS ONE'S A KEEPER

"Almost every year a calf is born on graduation day," Pete pronounces, "and this year we're ready for another one." He may know his cows and birthing schedules. But, turns out, Putney's herdsman extraordinaire miscalculated this time—by a few hours.

■ It was the evening of the day before graduation. Siedra Loeffler '07 and Rosie Newton '06 had gone to the cow barn so that they could say goodbye to each other and Rosie could say a final farewell to the cows. ■ **Siedra:** "We knew that

Eleanor was in the calving pen so we walked down to check on her. No baby yet. We sat on grain bags and talked. We noticed that it looked like her water had broken. So we kept watching with careful eyes. After a while, Eleanor started to shift around. A contraction came and she started to

There will be a lot of work this summer. Putney's farm is not a profit-making enterprise but it supplies the school with 15–20% of its food and all of its milk (with the spare sold commercially).

Pete is a sixth-generation Vermont dairy farmer. In 1996, with great reluctance, he left the family farm in Saxtons River; it had become apparent that one farm could not support both his father's family and his. He brought with him to Putney a few Holsteins as well as a broad knowledge of breeds, udders, insemination, pedigrees, embryo transfers and cow shows. Putney now has a prize-winning, 35-head herd of Holsteins and Jerseys, and Putney students have helped Pete and Margie manage the conception and birth of most of them.

Margie came to Putney after working as an elementary school teacher at the Westminster Center School in Westminster, VT. Prior farming experience includes running a farmstead and working at Harlow Farm in Westminster. While Pete's main area of responsibility is the herd and overall management of the farm, Margie is in charge of the small animal barn and the gardening. And while that delineation seems clear on paper, it's actually difficult to see. "I back him up," explains Margie. "He backs me up. We are in this entirely together."

Together, yes, and with a rotating gang of 10–12 students. Opportunities for students in the Farm Program remain what they've been for years: AM Barn, PM Barn and an Afternoon Activity with tasks covering everything from gardening to field reclamation to routine maintenance work. In March there is sugaring to attend to. This Project Week three students are making hay while the sun shines. A larger group is training calves for Brattleboro's annual Strolling of the Heifers parade. The farm is busy—crawling with students, two farmers, and a lot of camaraderie.

push. You could see the casing, with little tiny hooves." ■ **Rosie:** "Because this would be Eleanor's first birth and Siedra and I had only a little experience with animal birth, we called Margie, who arrived with tea and cookies. She tied a halter to the calf's hooves and we pulled with each of Eleanor's

pushes." ■ **Siedra:** "Well, actually, Rosie and Margie pulled. I stood soothing the mom and telling her she was doing a great job." ■ **Rosie:** "Margie and I were pulling as hard as we could. I was frightened of breaking the baby's legs. Then the tension gave and the calf fell from her mother. For a moment we

held our breath, scared to think that the calf was not alive. But with help from her mother, she took her first gasp. It was amazing to see something that looked so lifeless one moment become lively with one breath." ■ **Siedra:** "We cheered very quietly."



Pete explains: "Margie's and my stints here have coincided with the trustees' decision to endow the farm in the same way that they endow, say, the English department, which is expected to impart knowledge and skills but not turn a profit doing so. This means that we can spend quality time with the students. Also, we can concentrate on initiatives that fit in well with Putney's emphasis on sustainability. We have an intensive rotational grazing program; cows fertilize fields while they graze and then only re-enter those fields when the fields have healthy, new growth and are ready to be grazed. That means these fields require no commercial fertilizer or additional manure applications. Our manure management program provides composted fertilizer and nutritionally-enriched irrigation water. We have reclaimed fields from weed. And, working with Science Teacher Hans Estrin and his Project Week students, we now process biodiesel, which will soon power the vast majority of the farm equipment."

Pete's goal: "I don't intend—and I don't think Carmelita Hinton ever intended—to train farmers. Instead, we give students an experience of real life that contributes to their sustenance. We don't grow fancy, boutique stuff. We grow what we eat."

Margie's goal: "I hope that we're educating Farm Program students in a 'round ball' sort of way about the world and what they take from it. When our graduates go to the grocery store, they will know where food comes from and what it took to get it to the store."



<top> **BRYANT DOSSMAN '07** MAKES BIODIESEL FROM 100% WASTE VEGETABLE OIL.

<above> **HALLIE NEWMAN '08** ON AFTERNOON ACTIVITY CREW. <below> **BEN SHAPIRO '09** PREPARES "HIS" CALF, JODY, FOR A STROLL. <below left> **THE AFTERNOON ACTIVITY CREW** PAINTS THE BARN RED.

