



Why the Farm

is Important

Everyone knows that Elm Lea Farm is an important part of The Putney School. Do you know why? Ah. Mind gone blank? Vague feeling of “farm-ness” swirling in your head that you just can’t seem to put into words? You’re not alone.

Let’s put it this way. Imagine The Putney School hired a moving company to take us away to some other location. The Northfield campus of Northfield Mount Hermon is for sale. Let’s make our hypothetical move there: the books, the tables, the teachers, the students, the music stands, the academic program, the afternoon activities, the work program, evening activities and the portrait of Carmelita that hangs over the admission director’s fireplace. When we’re all moved in, who would we be?

This brings us a little closer to defining just exactly what the farm is. It’s more than the cows, the silo, the pastures, the farmers and the work that gets done there every day. It’s more than the farming way of life that has students rolling in for morning milking every day at 5:30 A.M.

So, why is the farm important?

Some members of Carol Dickson’s tenth grade writing class took on the assignment of asking their peers and adults on campus this question. Here’s what they heard back . . .

The Farm

Alumni have fond feelings for the farm, perhaps more than anyone does, because those memories of shoveling manure gutters at the crack of dawn have become almost entirely happy ones over time. One such alum recently donated \$4.5 million to the farm in order to preserve it in perpetuity.

Actually, \$4 million will be invested; the earnings of which will take up the slack between the farm's income and its yearly cost of operation. The farm operates at a loss because, although a real producer of dairy items, its primary function is education and so it runs on an economic scale different from that of a farm without need for student supervision. The other \$500,000 is earmarked for catching up on maintenance and improvements to the farm buildings and equipment (see sidebar opposite).

“In many respects, the farm is the heart and soul of the school. It sounds corny (pun intended), but to a large extent the character of the school, the independence, confidence, and willingness of Putney Students to work, and the deep connection to meaningful responsibility, the land and the tradition of New England farming are all results from our having a farm. To me, the farm is less important as an educational experience (although it is an amazing educational experience) as it is important as an authentic life experience. While I would like to see more explicit connections made for students among the food we eat, our labor, the land, our health, etc. I personally am content to know that I live and work on a small dairy farm and that the school contributes in a meaningful way to the stewardship of a rapidly disappearing way of life. If Putney can survive for another 60 years, the farm may be a unique and enduring testament to values and traditions that have all but disappeared from our culture.”

—*Dave Arnstein,*
Dean of Students

“The farm reminds us of our connections to the land and to the local economy, and it encourages us to connect our academic lives to the world beyond the classroom.”

—*Carol Dickson,*
English Teacher



“The farm puts everyone in the school on the same plane, preventing the idea that one student is at all better than another.”

—*Walker Emerson '05*

“The farm does a lot of things. It gives us a rural setting and it shows us where our food comes from. It teaches us how to care for animals and also adds a dimension of hard labor to the school. It shows us the hard work that goes into farming and gives us great satisfaction when we get the job done.

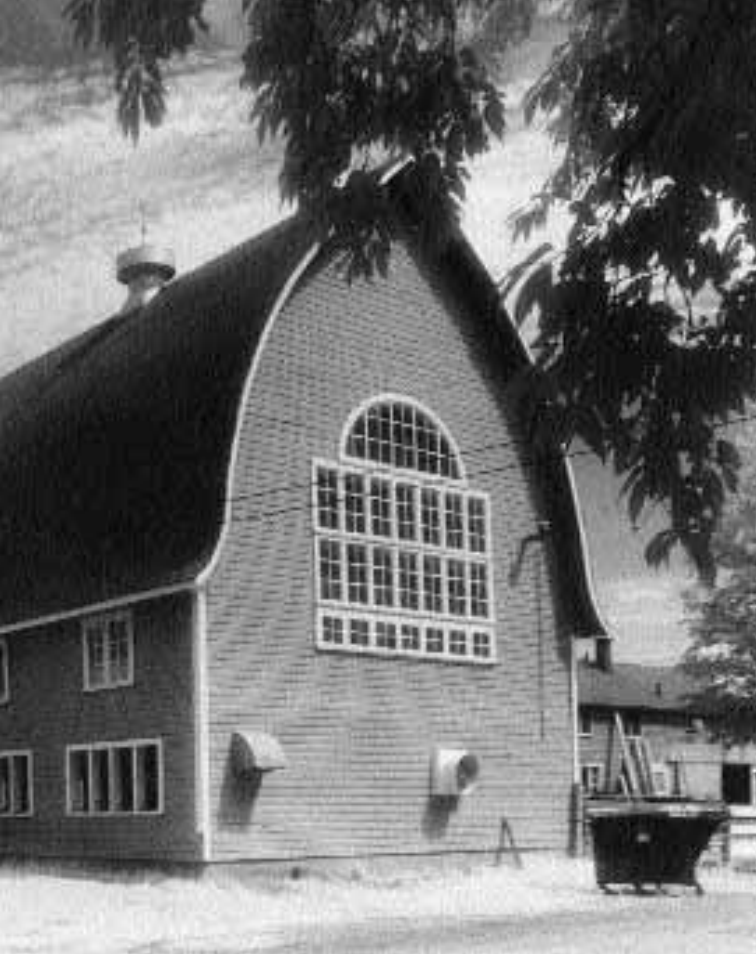
—*Nancy Hellekson,*
Library Director

“The farm is important because the farm is a good work experience and it gets people out of their comfort zone.”

—*Nat Herz '05, Student*
Co-Head of School 04–05

“There is something about the practical nature of agriculture that's hard to teach otherwise. Opinions on topical discussions, such as conventional versus organic farming, are better informed. The farm clearly demonstrates that Putney is dedicated to making a better world. None of this matters if the farm doesn't make a profit—at least within the institution's definition of profit. From what I've heard, the farm supplements the school's menu and, when milk and other income is factored in, costs about the same to run as an academic department.”

—*Steve Kerr, Vermont*
Secretary of Agriculture



“The farm is important because it is a lot of work and you have to work hard also. Cows are cool.”

—Yutaro Maki '06

“The farm connects students to the land, teaches them to respect the process of growing food and allows them a healthy life.”

—Judy Sheridan,
Associate Director

“On the farm we produce things such as milk, eggs and meat which not only provide for the school, but also teach an important value of independence to the students.”

—Adam Mirani '07

“It promotes a work ethic in The Putney School which prepares its students for the real world.”

—Tyler Rasch '06

“I think it’s important because it makes Putney unique. It teaches you how to work. If you slack off on the farm work, the farm will fall apart. People who come from cities obviously have never worked on a farm or in a cow barn. They will get a really good experience from working in the farm.”

—Katie Schwartz '07

“It teaches people to work with a group because you realize, if you’re not working, then you’re making somebody else work for you.”

—Clay Shank '05

“The farm is important to me because it is the best thing about The Putney School. Without the farm I would not be here, nor would I want to be here. It would be your run-of-the-mill prep school. Bah humbug without the farm. I love the farm!”

—Cara Snarski,
Athletic Director,
Horse Program Manager

“It’s a unique and, in many cases, the only chance for these people to experience the satisfaction of food production. And it’s real work they can quantify. Many kids aren’t entirely sure what their parents do for a living beyond talking on the phone a lot. Farm work is pure physical exertion. Some start out unable to fill a wheelbarrow in the allotted time. But even the most reluctant kids have been able to make the transition from working with me to working for me. I can trust them to complete tasks on their own. And they begin to understand the seven-days-per-week aspect of farming and that, if they slack off or skip a day, it only makes more work for their friends because the work absolutely has to get done every day. Beyond that, it’s important to remember that farming is the basis of the study of art and music. Time for such things didn’t exist before we learned how to till the land.”

—Pete Stickney,
Farm Manager

Farm Improvements

Of the \$4.5 million dollars donated by to preserve Elm Lea Farm in perpetuity, \$500,000 is earmarked for retiring deferred maintenance and making some improvements to the physical plant. Here is the plan for how it will be spent:

- Renovate and rebuild the barns to improve the comfort of the animals and the ways in which we care for them.
- Small barn rebuilt for sheep, chickens and pigs with better brooding capability.
- Winterize windows that allow better ventilation in all seasons.
- Proper manure storage facility for the horse barn.
- General clean up of old junk (dumpsters and such).
- Nothing fancy. No state-of-the-art gutter cleaners, for example. We have teenage muscles for that stuff.



Photo center: *The Barn*, 1988,
Sandy Sorlien '72