

BEFORE THE SUN RISES

New York Times Reporter
ALICE CALLAHAN '98
on the Gifts of the Farm

STORY BY BETH STICKNEY P'23



THE SUMMER AFTER her first year at Cornell, Alice Green Callahan '98 came back to Putney. Specifically, she came back to the farm. She found herself back at Putney again the following summer.

Maybe it was because she didn't arrive at Putney until junior year. Maybe it was the cows she had grown so fond of, like Milly and Nicky. And maybe it had something to do with Pete Stickney. The two forged a deep connection as the 16-year-old from a small, rural town in Kentucky made the transition to broader horizons (or should I say, pastures?).

The Putney farm program is a gem. For most students, it is their first opportunity to see a calf being born, to name it, and to get up before dawn to care for it and the rest of the herd. Some take pride in the fact that milk from Putney's herd helps create the award-winning cheeses produced by local cheese-makers. All take comfort in the fact that Pete is right there with them for early morning barn duties.

But not many students come from farm life *and* find their lives transformed by the Putney farm. That was the case with Alice. Feeling bored with the education she was receiving in Kentucky, Alice began thinking about boarding schools. Vermont seemed to make sense, given the fact that she fondly recalled visits to her grandmother's small cabin in Cabot. But still, Alice says, "I think that when I arrived at Putney, my sense of identity was shaken." She felt "how strange it was to be surrounded by people who knew nothing about me, didn't know my parents, didn't know the stretch of creek where I grew up." While she had indeed grown up on a small farm, Kentucky was a much different environment than Vermont.

THE
Farm
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This page and following:
Alice and Pete showing
calves at the Addison County
Fair in the mid-1990s

Pete was there for her from the beginning, perhaps in a more profound way than he realized at the time. You see, Alice's father had died when she was twelve. Right away, she sensed that Pete understood her, and she saw him as a father figure. "I knew I could count on him," she says. Working under his guidance on the farm, she "felt solid" in herself again.

Pete's wife Patty says there is "magic" in the way he "engages with kids, particularly the kids that show such an interest in the farm." Clearly, Alice was one of those kids, fitting right in on the farm, and at the Stickney home, too, as Patty recalled. Over the years, the Stickneys have hosted many boarding students, for meals and afternoons of hiking and baking and tender loving care when homesickness sets in.

As much as Alice counted on Pete, he knew that he could count on her, too. He saw right away that she was "enormously capable and curious." He's known for taking the measure of a kid, sensing what challenges and responsibilities they might handle, and then giving them "the opportunity to take on what they can take on," as he puts it.

Pete told me recently that his most clear memory of Alice is the moment when he sent her off to the Addison County Fair to show some Putney calves. "I sent her with a string of cattle and left her...she just did it," he said.

Alice says her memories of the fairs all blend together, though she's pretty sure the photos she supplied to us are from that particular one. "Maybe it's notable that I don't remember much from [that day]. I must have felt completely capable of caring for those cows and preparing them for the show, and that was in large part because I knew that Pete believed I could handle it. And if he thought I could do it, I was game."

In fact, Alice says she was much more active on the farm at Putney than she was on her parents' farm. In the winter of her first year on campus, she was tossed right into the thick of it—AM Barn, the proving ground of a boarding student's commitment to life on the hill, the bonding experience of a lifetime, and perhaps the muckiest job of all. She was able to see the beauty in those early morning hours. She remembers the exhilaration of "being the first person in, flipping on the lights, feeling needed by the animals." By senior year, she was living in one of Putney's rustic cabins and had taken on the responsibility of doing the last



barn check as she made her way back for the night.

"Pete really counted on me to do that," Alice says.

Alice and Pete both recall walking the sheep pastures together, one summer after Alice did a college semester abroad studying rotational grazing in New Zealand. (Her major at Cornell was animal science). She remembers being the cheeky college student with lots of "new" ideas. Pete, in fact, was already practicing the method. He doesn't recall Alice being at all brash or pushy, only how they trod the hills, "making decisions together." Again, Pete's magic at work—treating the young adult as a peer and colleague, meeting her where she was and helping her see where she could go.

"I was a hard worker, I knew that, and Pete valued my work ethic and made me feel like if I was willing to put in the work, I could handle the cows at the fair, or getting in the hay, or speaking up as a student trustee in a room full of intimidating-looking adults," Alice says.

As she rose to whatever challenge Pete presented, her confidence grew. "I think I have carried that belief in myself through grad school, book projects, parenting and now as a

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reporter at *The New York Times*," Alice says. "And learning at Putney how much you can accomplish before the sun rises hasn't hurt either." ■



Alice has a PhD in nutritional biology from the University of California–Davis and writes about nutrition for *The New York Times*, working remotely from her home in Eugene, Oregon. (Pete and Patty report that they regularly read her articles.) She is also the author of *The Science of Mom: A Research-Based Guide To Your Baby's First Year* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

Callahan uses the barn in a creative writing assignment while a student at Putney. Brian Morgan, mentioned in the piece, is a former head of school. >>

Thursday Paragraph

Alice

~~At 10:00~~ The barn is like a hushed cathedral, and I move about quietly and quickly. It is 10:00 feeding for the cows, a late night ritual for us all. ~~It is the time~~ Brian Morgan is driving around on his night check, homework is being finished or started, and a couple of students share ramen from a pot between them. In the barn, the cows heave their tired-mother bodies to their feet, shift in their stalls, and wait for food. I break a bale in front of them as they watch, ~~paying~~ attention towards the smell of good rowen labored over last summer. Some patiently wait for me to throw them a flake, and others eagerly drop to their knees and stretch towards a neighbor's ration. Gem gets a half a scoop of grain because she's losing weight. I call the calves in for the night and shut the door against the cold. I glance around to see that all is as it should be and then walk ~~towards~~ ~~through~~ the door, turning off lights as I go. The thought of the barn ghost passes through my mind as I feel my way in the dark to the door, but I hear the ~~quiet breath~~ of cows munching on hay, and knowing security, ~~with~~ wish them good night.

Amber, Alice, & I love that silent meditative feel, the half-slumber, the rumbling chug, the steam, and getting to know them and the ghostly intention when you come in...