

Dairy MAN

Pete Stickney
Bids Farewell
After 27 Years
on the Farm

STORY BY
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THIS STORY about The Putney School’s dairy herd, and the bleary-eyed teenagers who wake early to work with that herd, starts in Norway. Trondheim, Norway, a lush and colorful historic city on the Trondheim Fjord, six hours north of Oslo. The city of 200,000 people hosts the annual World Cheese Awards.

The 2023 World Cheese Awards—the most important cheese competition that exists—received over 4,500 entrants. Only seven “Super Gold” awards were given to U.S. cheesemakers, and two Super Golds were awarded to Parish Hill Creamery in Westminster, Vermont, owned by Pete Dixon ’76, whose milk—*all of it*—comes from The Putney School.

JOIN US for a Zoom event celebrating Pete on May 14. Register at putneyschool.org/alumni

Pete Stickney with the bustle of PM Barn crew in the background

Which is another way of saying that the milk that produces the best cheese in the United States is brought to market by a crew of teenagers that rotates and learns anew six times a year.

How do they do it?

“It’s hard work. It’s attention to detail. It’s a lot of kids who care. My friends who are dairy farmers think this is nuts, that you can take 16-year-olds who have never seen a cow before and produce this quality milk,” says Pete Stickney, Putney’s farm manager since 1996.



work

Pete insists that he is not the center of this story. But the quality of the Putney herd, and the experience students receive in the barn, reveal his genius.

ORIGINS

In the 1990s, Pete saw the writing on the wall. His family had been dairy farmers in Saxtons River for generations, and Pete worked with his father on that farm for 15 years after college. Small dairy farms across Vermont were closing at an alarming rate. What did Pete, a lifelong farmer, do when he got the job at Putney? “I started reading *a lot* about progressive education.”

As it turned out, it was the learning he’d been doing his whole life. “That’s how I was raised. Hands on. You meet the child or student where they are and say, ‘You can do *this*.’ It’s never occurred to the kid that they can do that because they’ve never done it before until they’re empowered to do it. That is how I’ve met students. ‘You can do this. I’m going to teach you.’”

Pete adds, “The kids who have been empowered by the farm experience are not necessarily farming now.” A barn sub, for example, walks into the barn and says, “Give me any job.” Shovel gutters, feed, milk, you name it. “I love that. It’s so powerful for that student to walk in there and say that. A lot of these kids are doing something their parents can’t do, or most of the faculty for that matter. Many of these kids think the only thing they can do to impress their parents is to get an A. This school is about something different.”

Many of the best teachers are themselves eager learners who stay open and curious, willing to grow. Pete felt especially encouraged by Emily Jones, whose trust in Pete grounded him. “Emily created a safe space to fail, if you fail with your eyes open and learn something from it. ‘This is what I thought. This is what I did. This is what I now realize. This is what I’ll do next time.’ She created that atmosphere for all of us. And it’s a really good way to work. Failing with some humility. She created that, and I’ve always appreciated it.”

Three generations of dairy cows at Harvest Festival 2023: from left, Freckle, Fiji, Fresno, Francine, Falaise

At the end of this school year, Pete will hang up his hat and turn over the keys to the farm truck.

SMILE PETE LOVES YOU

If you’ve been to the barn, you remember how it feels. Its smell, its size, the sounds of the cows and students working. Alumni visit regularly. Pete rarely remembers their names. “I’m terrible with names!” he confesses. But he knows their stories. He knows who they *are*.

“Sarah Ross Bussey ’99 and I had this great fight outside the ring of Tunbridge Fair. We were all wearing Putney School t-shirts. She was there ready to show a calf. I said, ‘Tuck in your shirt.’ She said, ‘Why?’ I said, ‘It shows respect to the judge.’ She said ‘I haven’t tucked in my shirt since I was five.’ And I said ‘I don’t care, tuck it in.’ She refused. I said I’d get someone else to show the calf. She was furious. And she did it. She went through Reed College, working in the court system. She said she’d be in the courtroom, and was the only woman, and was the only white person. She’s so ballsy.” Sarah returned to the barn (and happily ran into Pete) last summer. She recalled, “Pete was one of the most influential people in my life as young person. He saw in me capacities that I had not yet tapped. During a period in life when I needed guidance but lacked that insight, Pete stepped in like a second father offering support, mentorship, and opportunities to push me.” Indeed.

Leo Gadické ’17 also recently visited Pete at the barn. Soft-spoken with an observant eye, Leo seemed to be on a philosopher’s track during his time as a student. Instead, he has become an EMT in Boston. Leo was thrilled to see Pete. “He didn’t come out and say it, but he implied that doing this made him know he could be an EMT. It’s the Leos that interest me more than the kids who are farming now. The fact that they came into that barn—it was a huge challenge,



and they surmounted it. Alice Green [see p. 10]. Leo Gadické. Sarah Ross. People carry it with them.” He pauses, moves on, then returns to this vignette. “The Leo thing. It really lifted me.”

Graham Berwind ’47 endowed the farm with a \$4 million gift in 2008 after a visit to campus. Pete led Graham and his daughters on a tour of the barn. Ever wise, Pete knew what to do: “I kept my mouth shut. And Graham’s stories flowed, ‘I remember there were horses here. I remember taking a truck with no brakes down to town to get gravel, I remember . . .’ At the end of it, he said, ‘Pete, that was amazing,’ and I didn’t say a word. I know enough to keep quiet. You just let the memories wash over. He hadn’t been in that barn since 1947.” After receiving the gift, the school was able to tackle deferred maintenance, and the mandate of “Keep the farm going” made its way into the school’s budget line.

Every iconic bit of Putney lore has a backstory. Take, for example, the “SMILE PETE LOVES YOU” painted on the barn’s silo. For people who came to Putney in this century, it’s always been there, a humorous wink, sweet and straightforward. Sarah Ross—of the Tunbridge Fair fight—and friends

painted this as their senior prank the night before graduation, as “a way to blast to the community how cherished Pete was and is.” This is what this is about. You’re shoveling shit, you had to tuck your t-shirt in, and you know that Pete loves you.

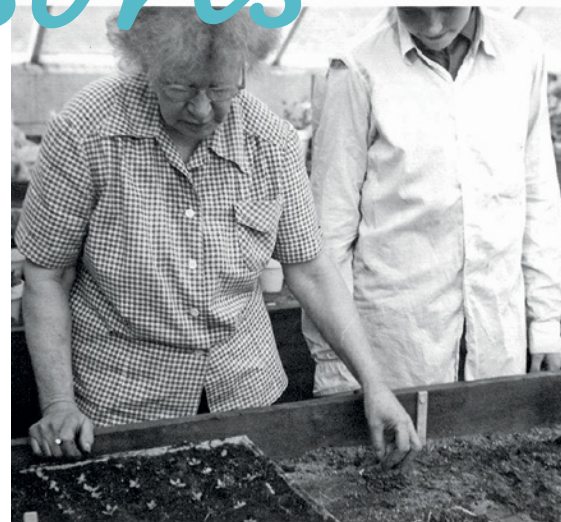
THE WORK OF TEENAGERS

Glenn Littledale ’76 ran the Putney barn for a handful of years in the late 1980s, and teaches science at the school now. He knows his dairy cows, and pulls back the cover on how important Pete’s work has been. “Pete is a cow man. He’s a two-millionth generation dairy farmer. Pete has always concentrated on spectacular cows who have wonderful type, can stand in the barn for a long time, and can make milk over the long haul. That brought pride and joy in having a barn where you see perfect legs and feet. You see rear udders that go way up high. Level udders. Everything is straight out of *Hoard’s Dairyman*. Everything is as it should be. If you’re a dairy person, that’s poetry. “

It takes attention and patience to create top-quality milk with a crew of students, a balance of oversight and experiential



lessons



Pete, left, takes comfort in the wisdom of Putney's first farm manager, Hutch Maynard, right, whose gravestone reads, "Seed time and harvest shall not cease."

position, and that doesn't always come with being good with teenagers."

Typical of Putney, Pete, who is usually wearing a hat, wore many: search committees to hire both Emily Jones and Danny O'Brien, girls' basketball coach, trustee, chair of the field house committee, history teacher. Pete went back to school to get a history degree to teach when he was in his 40s, and earned a reputation as a person who holds students accountable, creates a safe space for girls, and for teaching that having empathy for people who you don't relate to matters. In the classroom, Pete found a balance. "There's a contrast between constructing a curriculum and managing cows. It's night and day. You use different sides of your brain."

Former English teacher Zoe Parker introduced Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels" to the curriculum. One day, while Pete was teaching that reading, things went sideways. In "Living Like Weasels," a woman sits on a stump, sees a weasel, wonders what the weasel thinks, and ponders the purpose of life. Pete sees "a harried woman who got the kids to school, has a job, has to take care of her mother. She looks at this weasel and thinks 'Are you happier than I am?'" Pete asked the kids, "Who wrote this poem? What do you see?" He loves open-ended questions with

no correct answers. The boys in the class started criticizing the woman, saying she's an art school dropout. Pete kept them after class, and had a clear message for them. "I don't tell you guys how to think very often, but what the hell was that? We take one of the most brilliant pieces of writing in the American canon, and you guys are making fun of the author? Is it because she's a woman?" They didn't say a word. I gave them something to think about."

Pete, attuned to classroom dynamics, opens doors for students who don't easily feel confident speaking in class. "I'd have an online dialogue with kids—many of them girls—who couldn't elbow their way in. I'd know what they were thinking about that reading, and I'd be able to say, 'Isn't that similar to what we talked about?' It gave them a space. I didn't want to put them on the spot, but wanted them to know they were a part of the conversation." His strong presence in the classroom opened space for the women and held the men accountable. "I wasn't perfect at it. Recognizing it for something to strive for is important."

** PARTING THOUGHTS **

After almost three decades, what sticks with him?

"It was a mutually beneficial relationship," he reflects. "I got to stay home next to my parents, live in this gorgeous place, and meet people from around the world."

Pete also expresses appreciation for his wife, Patty, and her patience with the day-to-day demands of his work. After years of life as a farmer and farmer's wife—cows need to be milked on national holidays and weekends—Patty and Pete have a stretch of freedom ahead that they haven't known in more than twenty-five years. Travel. Kayaks. Bikes. Family. Maybe another teaching gig for Pete, at least for a few years, as he's not yet ready to retire. In late March of 2020, Pete's scheduled afternoon activities—cleaning sugaring lines and setting up fencing—needed to be done, but the student crew was home, learning online. Pete and Patty took on the tasks together. "We loved it. That was a really sweet time for us, working together in early spring weather."

In a career of meaningful work, the ups and downs level out, and contentment takes

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root. The "kids are different these days" refrain floats around on campuses from one decade to the next. Pete sees it too. "The helicopter parent has become the bulldozer parent: *my child will never experience discomfort*. Yes, that makes my job harder, unless I get up on the other side of the bed, and then it makes it more important."

What advice does Pete have for the next farm manager? Patience. With the kids. With the whole scene. "It will always require patience—you don't ever come up to speed. If you think we're going to get there, it's going to be hard for you." Teaching and learning. It's messy. It's brilliant. It's Putney.

As we turn off the lights and close the door on this chapter, the story does not end, because the rhythms of life and death, of milking, learning, and growing, are not tied to any one person. In fact, Pete's favorite cow is bred to his favorite bull. "She's not going to calve until the week after I leave. It's the feeling of . . ." Pete searches for the words, his eyes looking out to the long horizon. He's smiling. "...It's best said by Hutch Maynard, Putney's first farm manager: her gravestone at Lower Farm says, 'Seed time and harvest shall not cease.'" ■

education. Usually students do the job correctly, but not always. "It's *constant* reminders to the kids," says Pete. "A kid might do something right five times in a row, but that does not mean they're going to do it right the sixth time." For example, washing a cow's teats. "You're doing two things: you're cleaning the teats, and you're stimulating milk let-down. So you have to rub them with warm water and then dry them carefully with a clean dry towel. That stimulates a hormone release. Kids will tell me there's no milk. 'Well, you haven't washed her, and you've thrown down a perfectly dry towel.' It's an example of something that comes up over and over and over."

** LESSONS **

How can the barn's impact be measured? Is it in the number of farmers the school graduates? Is it in the award-winning milk? It might better be measured by the stories alumni tell in the back half of this magazine, memories of empowerment, early mornings, and pride in a job done well.

Again, Glenn Littledale fills out the picture. "Pete is incredible in his capacity to have a joyful time being with kids. Without that, the farm is still the farm experience, but the tone is different. In Pete's heart, he loves being with teenagers. That's pretty special, and you don't always get that. There's a skill set that you absolutely need in that

