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# Unity Farm Sanctuary

JANET MENDELSON **writer**

**it is** challenging enough to find homes for shelter cats and dogs, but what happens to the dairy cow that can't give milk or a lesson pony who can no longer carry riders? How about roosters hatched by backyard chickens in towns that prohibit keeping the noisier males?

Unity Farm Sanctuary in Sherborn is home to 62 mammals and 225 birds who owe their wellbeing to Kathy and John Halamka and their team of six full-time and four part-time staff, assisted by nearly 1,200 volunteers and over 1,500 donors. On 30 acres adjacent to 30 more acres of Sherborn Rural Land Trust, the sanctuary cares for alpacas, llamas, horses, donkeys, sheep, cows, goats, pigs, dogs, turkeys, ducks, 100 hens, and 67 roosters rescued from situations that could no longer support them.

Some rescues seem to have taken on farm chores. Geese honk loudly to assist the Great

Pyrenees dogs who warn away predators. Guineafowl will eat ticks (thank you). And Wallace the Red (a Highland/Red Angus bovine) is a sanctuary “greeter.”

The Halamkas lived in Wellesley from 1996 to 2012, before founding the sanctuary in 2016. Their daughter, Lark, was educated in the Wellesley Public Schools. Kathy and John met as first years at Stanford. She became a professional artist, working now in photography. John is an emergency physician, former CIO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and current president of the Mayo Clinic Platform, working with healthcare leaders internationally to transform



COURTESY OF UNITY FARM / PHOTO BY KATHY HALAMKA

good works “a compassionate and kind place”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNITY FARM / PHOTOS BY KATHY HALAMKA

health by leveraging artificial intelligence. He’s also chair of the sanctuary board, certified in sustainable organic agriculture, and the first call for carpentry and machinery repair. “John can fix almost anything,” said Kathy, who is the sanctuary’s executive director.

About 20 years ago, Lark urged her parents toward a cruelty-free life. They’ve been vegans for decades so animal rescue came naturally. But they wanted to do more to include community outreach and education. They spent a tremendous amount of time thinking about what they wanted to do. Inspired by Jane Goodall, they bought land near the former Peace Abbey to establish the farm sanctuary as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

On a warm, sunny day, Kathy and I talked about the sanctuary and its mission while volunteer Cheryl Townsend tended goats in a nearby

paddock. Townsend, 79, from Framingham, later told me after 30 years volunteering at a cat and dog shelter she was burnt out. But Unity Farm Sanctuary is “a compassionate and kind place.”

Colorful chickens and speckled guinea hens roam freely on a grassy slope, where Wellesley resident Lisa Pastor was leading a Storytime Tour, one of many programs coordinated by Jennifer D’Angelo, humane education director, to offer humane education for all ages.

“For us, it’s not enough to just save the animals’ lives,” said Kathy. “They have to have a good quality of life. The animals all have play areas here and enjoy socializing with our visitors and volunteers. We work with our team of veterinarians to make medical decisions that are in the animal’s best interests so they won’t suffer.”

Neither of the Halamkas was raised on a farm. Kathy developed her skills on the job. “John and I are inveterate learners,” she said.

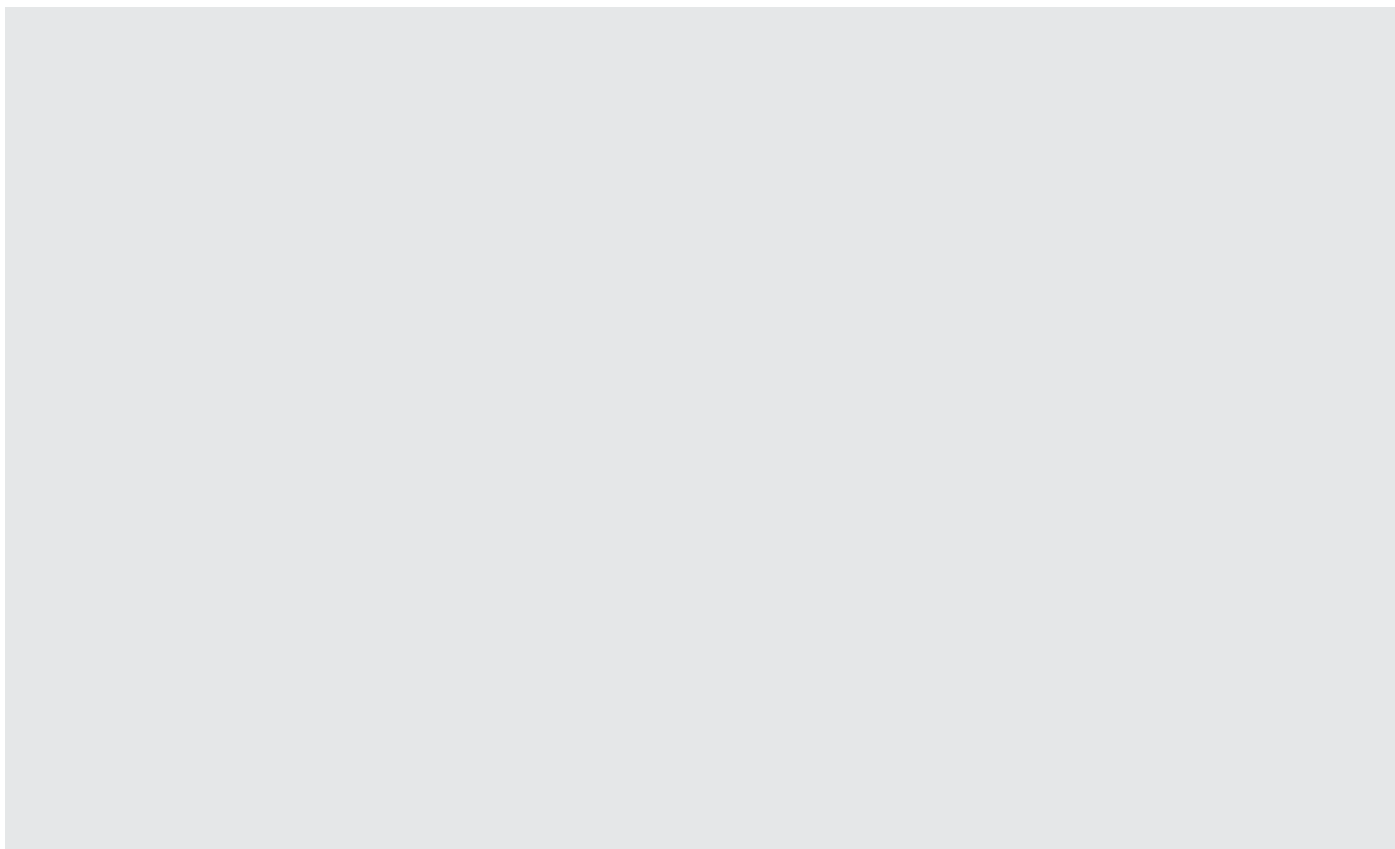
A common thread winds through the life stories that bring its diverse group of residents to the sanctuary.

“People buy and adopt animals with good intentions but sometimes it becomes too much to take care of them,” said Kathy. “Some people age-out of being able to do the work. Or their money runs out. The cost of caring for a horse can be overwhelming, especially when someone’s financial situation changes. Rarely is it just a case of animal abuse.”

Turnip, a white Holland turkey, is a very



COURTESY OF UNITY FARM / PHOTO BY KATHY HALAMKA



Go to [www.unityfarmsanctuary.org](http://www.unityfarmsanctuary.org) to learn about:

- Guided sanctuary tours
- Storytime Tours for preschoolers
- Becoming a volunteer
- Sponsoring an animal
- Plant-based cooking classes
- Celebration of Turkeys on November 24, 2024
- Art for the Animals—a fundraiser auction November 26, 2024
- Winter Solstice Tours during December
- Dudleyfest Event on June 7, 2025

Or drop off your:

- Uncarved pumpkins after Halloween as animal treats
- Christmas trees in January to feed the goats

For safety reasons, unscheduled animal visits are not permitted.



COURTESY OF UNITY FARM / PHOTO BY KATHY HALAMKA

social guy who reportedly flirts with everyone. He was rescued by a woman, but three years later she had to sell her home to take care of her mother. Turnip was three at the time. Turkeys can live seven to 10 years, so he needed a safe place to go.

Micky, an American Cream Draft/Appaloosa horse was rescued at birth 22 years ago from a Premarin farm where foals were discarded. Micky looks fetching in a fly mask worn as sunglasses for uveitis and to protect his pale eyes from the sun.

Audrey Heifer, a gentle Jersey cow, came from New Hampshire where she was surrendered by a dairy prior to auction and subsequent death. Audrey had a twin brother, a situation that often results in a sterile female or “freemartin.” Since she’s unable to give milk, the commercial dairy farm couldn’t keep her.

“Audrey is incredibly motherly,” said Kathy. “Like people, cows have best friends who they lick to show affection! She loves everybody, especially her friend Elliot Steer, an 1,800-pound rescue who thinks he’s a puppy.”

More than 150 farm sanctuaries operate in the U.S., plus many smaller rescues referred to as micro-sanctuaries. Unity networks with shelters across New England and beyond to find homes for as many animals as possible.

“We can’t take them all,” noted Kathy. “We’re limited partly by our land. Goats need shelter from the weather. Horses need their own stalls. We have a set budget for medical care, feed, and operating expenses. We field calls daily from people who want us to take cats, dogs, rabbits, or chickens they adopted during the pandemic, now that they work away from home again.”

Wellesley residents Jim and Allison Carroll and their children Carson, 20, and Sophia, 18, have been volunteers and donors for two years. The family had fostered two baby ducks who quickly grew too big to keep. Giving them to another farm almost doomed the ducklings to slaughter.

“We couldn’t let that happen,” said Jim. “We’d gotten too attached.” Now he volunteers weekly, cleaning chicken coops, feeding and watering the birds, and training new volunteers. Allison and their kids social-

ize with the animals, a valuable task that, Jim said, has increased his kids’ empathy for animals and taught them that caring for others demands responsibility.

“I’ve worked on Wall Street my whole career and never gave these kinds of animals a thought,” he said. “I hadn’t even realized there was a need. Here, everyone is kind. The animals appreciate it, too. The geese and bigger animals recognize you. Even when I’m bundled up in winter, they know my voice and come right up to me. The place is amazing. It’s a loving atmosphere that extends into the community.”

Outreach ranges from plant-based cooking classes taught by Board member Tyler Wehr (a former chef of The Country Club) to an Animal Care Circle that teaches hands-on skills to kids ages 10 to 12. Frequent sanctuary tours sell out regularly and Kathy is coordinating a local Farms Day during this year’s Sherborn 350th Celebration.

Unsurprisingly, it’s a magnet for community service projects. Students

from Weston Middle School, Wellesley High School, Wellesley Girl Scouts, and the Wellesley Chapter of the National Charity League all volunteer at the farm. And every weekday, one or two groups of teens and adults with special needs from surrounding communities visit the animals and help with chores.

A point of pride is Unity’s involvement with LEAP (Leaders for Ethics, Animals, and the Planet). The nationwide program for high school students prepares teens to be socially responsible and ready for careers addressing animal cruelty, climate change, habitat loss, or food deserts.

This fall, a local branch of the Boston Outdoor Preschool Network is relocating to Unity from Wellesley’s Elm Bank.

“It means a great deal to John and me that we can create something that gives our lives meaning and that can continue when we’re gone,” said Kathy. When the Halamkas pass away, the sanctuary will continue as a welcoming place for everyone in the local communities. 