

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

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WITH THE KIDS

The menu? Food for thought

Farm critters don't have to worry about their future at the Animal Acres shelter.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

It's a typical day at the animal shelter — Bagel is getting a good belly rub. Roscoe and Kirby are receiving pats and scratches on their heads. And Sophia and Precious Moment are being softly stroked as they nestle closer to humans.

Dogs? Cats? Bunnies? No, they're farm animals, namely pigs, cows and turkeys — and they're having a great time. These and other critters roam, snort, cluck and bleat freely at a new 25-acre rescue shelter devoted to caring for farm animals.

Animal Acres opened its doors last fall and has since welcomed 150 creatures to its bucolic pastures in Acton, 45 minutes north of Los Angeles. Here, animals that were once destined for slaughterhouses, factory farms or lives of indentured servitude are treated with a fond familiarity that's usually reserved for conventional pets.

Families can meet and greet sows and boars, sheep, goats and more at this Saturday's Compassionate Kids Day. Visitors can do farm chores or help children make pumpkin pies to feed to the turkeys. Guests can tour the facilities and learn about humane options in raising farm animals.

In addition to Saturday's festivities, the sanctuary holds a Farm Chore Day from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. every Saturday (participants must be 16 years and older), as well as offering guided tours to the public at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Sundays.

"So many kids never have the opportunity to interact with these animals," says Lorri Bauston, director of the shelter. "We want kids to understand, love and desire to protect these creatures as they would any other living thing."

Bauston certainly knows her way around the farm scene: She started the rescue movement in 1986 by opening up the first-ever sanctuary in upstate New York for abused and abandoned farm animals.

Now about 26 sanctuaries, by Bauston's estimate, dot the country, not only rescuing farm creatures but also advocating for better care and humane treatment of animals that are raised primarily for human consumption.

"More than 10 billion animals a year are produced in this country for food," says Bauston, who explains that most animal anti-cruelty laws often don't extend to traditional farm animals.

Sick cows that can't walk are often dragged to slaughterhouses. Egg-laying chickens are crammed into tiny cages and are unable to see sunlight or breathe fresh air. Turkeys' beaks and toes are clipped without anesthesia.

In fact, at the shelter many of the now older pigs were rescued from slaughterhouses by undercover volunteers who discovered piglets that had born to sows waiting to be butchered.

The shelter, which receives its funding through memberships and sponsorships, works with local governmental animal agencies and humane organizations to report on violations, with undercover volunteers often visiting stockyards and slaughterhouses. California, it turns out, is the only state in the country that gives farm animals protection under animal anti-cruelty laws.

"Even so, it's an uphill battle," Bauston says.

While there is an underlying vegan philosophy at the sanctuary, Bauston makes sure that visitors aren't faced with zealous lectures or weighty discussions.

"We are very careful to stay away from the 'V' word," she says. "Our big priority is to provide information for people to make choices. We want to gently educate. We found that most people are against cruelty even if they decide to keep

eating animals. I'm sure in our lifetime we'll see the end of battery cages and veal crates."

The shelter's proximity to Hollywood and vegetarian celebrities has certainly helped the cause, with actors such as Daryl Hannah and Persia White visiting and endorsing the facility. In fact, supportive actors such as James Cromwell, Jorja Fox and Charlotte Ross have received high honors from the shelter by having pigs named after them.

Overall, Bauston and the shelter's 200 volunteers share a sense of satisfaction in working around and on the behalf of farm animals. Here each animal has a name and there are many stories that reveal distinct personalities beneath feathers and fur.

"The other day the pigs dug up the water line and had a blast in the mud," says Kim Kaspari, a regular volunteer. "They were very happy they discovered something new — they are highly intelligent animals. They were just beaming with pride."

Sure, says Kaspari, there's the physical exhaustion of tending to the critters, but the work is rewarding.

"There's nothing like going into the restroom in the courtyard area and coming out to discover that the turkeys are waiting for you," she says. "They really like being around people."

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Animal Acres

What: Compassionate Kids Day at Animal Acres

Where: 5200 Escondido Canyon Road, Acton

When: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Price: Free

Info: (661) 269-0986; animalacres.org