

# My Biz: Iowa City preschool teaches socialization, digging in the dirt

Students learn responsibility through hands-on experience



Preschoolers Ezra Thomas and Mae Knights both of Iowa City feed bread crumbs to the chickens at the Kinderfarm Preschool in Iowa City. As part of their day the kids do chores on the farm like feeding the animals. (Brian Ray/The Gazette)

What kind of a school has 4 turkeys, 40 chickens, 20 geese, 2 llamas, 4 horses, 3 goats, 2 rabbits, 1 potbellied pig, a hamster, a chinchilla, several farm cats, a 20-acre farming campus and two vegetable gardens — but no computer and no television set?

Owner and director Heather Norman has run her natural environment KinderFarm Preschool for 19 years this past June.

Degreed in physical education from the University of Iowa, Norman admitted she really wanted to be a vet, not a teacher, but she was working as the director of a before- and after-school program in Iowa City when the opportunity arose to buy KinderFarm from Jim and Phyllis Tucker, who founded the school in 1973.

A staff of seven — which includes Norman and her husband, Jeff — run the business and classroom sessions that extend to outdoors chores and care of the animals and in-season gardens. Produce from those gardens are used for the children's lunches.

"Jeff is the chief driver, head chef and bottle washer," Norman added. "He does all the meal preparation, serving and cleanup."

Some 30 or more lunches are served every day.

"Our primary emphasis at this preschool is socialization," Norman explained. "We want children to be able to get

along in a group and that is our big push. We use this natural environment to enable them to explore because quite often they don't get that at home," she added.



Preschooler Landen Donius of Coalville pours food for the turkeys and chickens into a bowl at the Kinderfarm Preschool. (Brian Ray/The Gazette)

"They haven't ever dug in the dirt or planted a seed. They haven't ever ice skated on a frozen pond in January.

"Sometimes we'll take them on a walk out in the cornfield

and they'll find ears of corn that didn't go through the combine, so they'll pick them up, bring them back and take the corn off the cob and feed it to the chickens."

Learning sessions and chores are combined.

"If Jeff needs something for their lunch during garden season he might ask them to pick some cucumbers, so then that class would be responsible for completing that task to help him," Norman said by way of example.

"Having the jobs is being part of the group," says Norman, "and the children take that very seriously."

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