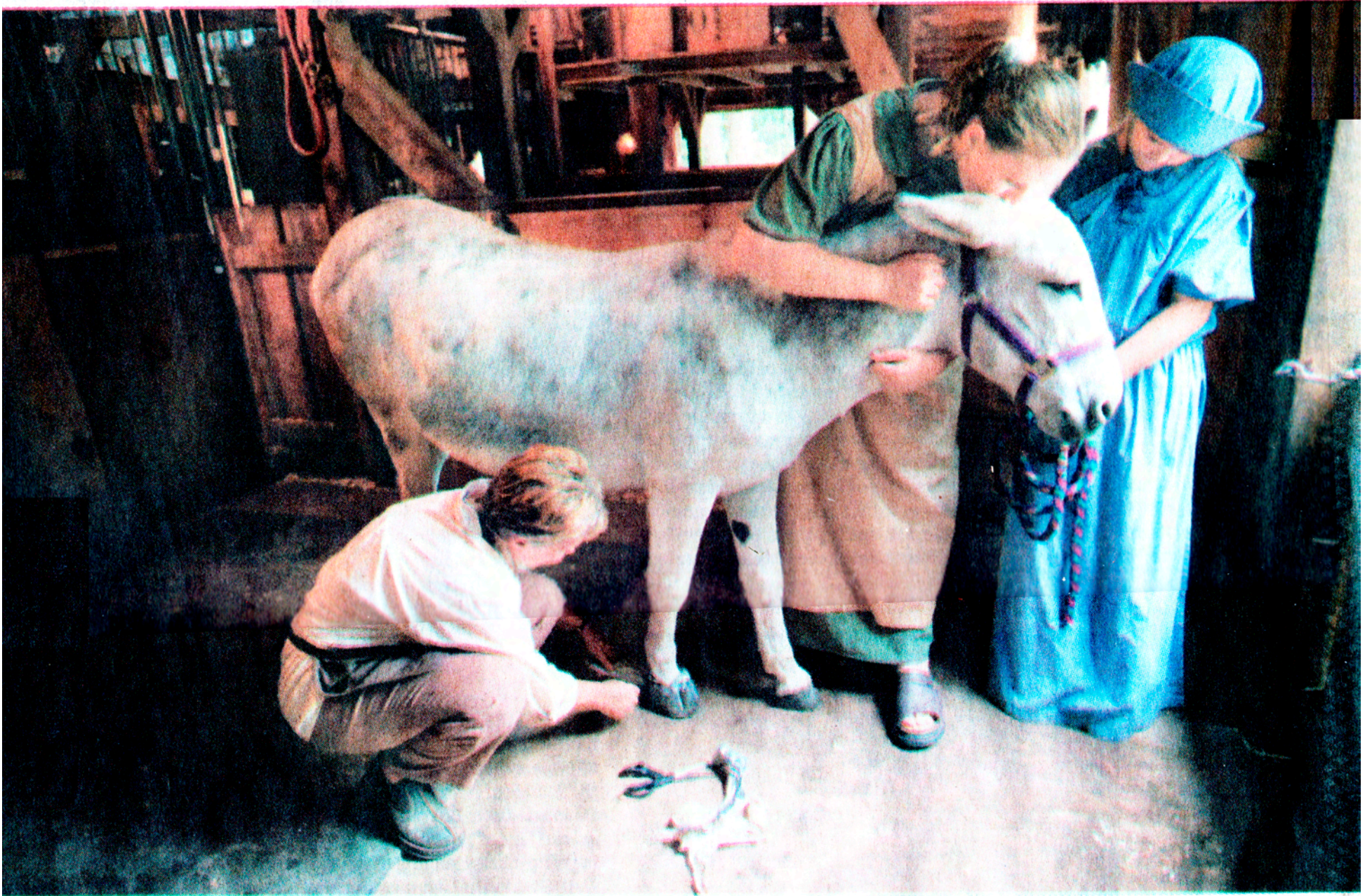


Living | Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2003



Animal Beat

'I am one with the animals'

Debbie White turned her farm into a sanctuary of caring and communion

By Vicki Croke
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

NORTON — Arriving at Winslow Farm feels like entering another world. There's a welcome temperature drop as you step onto the property, which is shaded by old pines, maples, and oaks. Then you catch the intoxicating scent of burning sage and hear the soothing strains of New Age music. As you open the gate, farm animals — geese, ducks, peacocks, sheep, goats, and miniature horses — turn and come toward you with such curious and friendly expressions that you half expect them to shout "Hello! How are you, friend?" It does not feel like a farm, really, where animals rarely make eye contact with you, but rather an interspecies soiree.

The fairy-tale atmosphere is no accident. Debbie White, the owner and president of this sanctuary for abused animals, worked three jobs simultaneously — as an administrative assistant, a

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/SUZANNE KREITER

Debbie White (top left, with volunteers Rebecca Martin and Annie Crosby, right) runs Winslow Farm, a shelter for abused animals in Norton. Above, creatures mingle peacefully.

Her animal sanctuary is labor of love

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veterinarian's assistant, and a salesperson — for 17 years to save enough money to create it. That gave her a long time to dream and plan.

The cornerstone of everything here, she says, had to be compassion. On these still-expanding 5 acres of wooded farmland, White constructed barns and sheds with her own hands, and when she talks about sheltering the animals, she means it in every sense of the word.

Seven years ago, after many of the structures were finished, she began to look for boarders. She scoured farm auctions looking not for the blue-ribbon specimens but for the worst down-and-outers. And she found them by the score.

The pig, Wilbur, had been ripped open by a marauding dog. Three sheep had been nailed into crates where their own urine and feces had fouled their wool and burned their skin. The buckskin miniature horse had been hit by a truck, and another had lived under a suburban deck for five years. A gorgeous and perfectly healthy golden pheasant had been slated for the taxidermist. Petie, the Nigerian dwarf goat, had been facing euthanasia because her overbite made her ineligible for the show ring. A white donkey named Stardust had been so neglected that his hooves, and the nerves inside them, grew out like skis. "It would be like having to walk around on toothaches," White says as she loops an arm under the gentle animal's neck.

All the animals are here now for life; White is not looking for homes for them. "You know that expression 'to be one with something'?" she asks. "Well, it's true here. I am one with the animals. If they're cold, I'm cold. When they're happy, I'm happy. There is no difference anymore with me."

A spiritual act

Second chances rule this roost. There are 207 animals here, and every one has a story. White has her own story too — she survived a serious head injury from a random act of violence — but it's something she doesn't want to talk about.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/SUZANNE KREITER

"As hard as all this is, all I can think is that I am blessed to be doing it," says Debbie White of her work at Winslow Farm.

White grew up on this property, in a little log cabin. Her father, David Sheldon White, whom she adored, suffered from Parkinson's when she was a child. Times were tough for the family, and when things needed to be built, she became his hands. It gave her the training to do all the building here for the animals now. During her father's illness, land had to be sold off, though he struggled to be sure some was left for her. White's eyes fill with tears as she speaks of the joy of having bought some of it back. Her commitment to his memory and to the animals who need help feels like a spiritual act to her, she says.

Despite what it took to get this far, the work isn't over. The farm, a nonprofit, costs \$800 a week in feed and vet bills alone. "It's too scary to even think about," White says. Paying visitors, grants, and tax-deductible donations enable her to stay afloat.

The physical labor involved in maintaining this place is staggering. The grounds are spotless, and the animals are clean and well fed. It's back-breaking work, and there are no paid staff members, just volunteers. White recalls her 50th birthday, on Feb. 17. There had been weeks of biting cold, and she awoke in the morning to the aftermath of a snowstorm. She and a volunteer shoveled their way to the animals and then hauled 60 buckets of water to them, as the spigot had frozen. The morning feed wasn't completed until 3 p.m. — nearly time to start the evening rounds. "As hard as all this is, all I can think is that I am blessed to be

Creature comfort

Winslow Farm, 37 Eddy St., Norton.
Hours: daily, noon to 5 p.m. Admission:
\$5 for adults, \$2.50 for children.
Call 508-285-6451 or visit
www.malocal.com/zoo.

doing it," White says.

The hardest task, it seems, is saying no. White estimates that she gets 20 calls a day to save animals in distress. It would be easy to say yes more often, but the farm would be swamped in no time, with an overload that wouldn't allow for good care for any of them. White says she guards against the impulse all the time. "It's painful for me to turn them away," White says. "I always wonder afterward whatever happened to them."

One thing she wants more of is visitors. The farm is open to the public and hosts children's birthday parties and holiday events. Benches (often occupied by goats) are spread throughout the grounds, and families are encouraged to just hang out and spend time with the animals, something that's hard to find even at zoos.

Nancy Anderson, a self-proclaimed Winslow Farm "regular," knows that too well. She moved from Boston to Norton a few years ago and discovered in the farm "a beautiful, peaceful place where I could be nurtured by nature." Life had been so fast-paced, she says, when she was "living in the con-

crete world" that she never noticed things the way she does here, where she can sit and contemplate. There are many surprises for her. "I had never thought about goats much before," she says with a laugh, "but now they are my favorite animals here."

Anderson says she was shocked at first to see the animals coexisting so serenely with one another — even cats mixing with the ducks. "There's a lesson in the harmony you see here," she says. "If the animals can do it, we ought to be able to do it too."

She connects with other humans on the farm, too, Anderson says. Sharing the experience of being with the animals seems to make people more open to one another. "And just watching the expression on the faces of the children who come in here is incredible," Anderson says.

Two-year-old Aubrie, visiting with her aunt Melinda Diauto, is shy around the animals when she first comes through the gate one warm afternoon recently, but she quickly gets over it. In no time, she is communing with the creatures of Winslow Farm. The animals, once so abused by humans, seem to be a forgiving lot, and they prove reliable with kids. Trust takes hold in minutes. White hopes the farm will foster compassion in all the kids who visit.

White has clearly already realized her dream, and yet her dream has grown. The woman who once worked nearly round the clock to bankroll this sanctuary now wants to expand it by 52 acres, open a charter school, set up nature trails, erect teepees for overnight camping, and install a holistic vet who would see patients here.

The farm was her vision, but the picture keeps getting bigger. Her new concern is the disappearing wilderness. The thought of habitat loss is staggering, but White brings to the equation the same no-nonsense logic that fueled the building of Winslow Farm. She is trying to raise enough money to buy the woods and meadows around the refuge. She might not be able to save the rainforest, but, she says, "I can preserve what's right in front of me."