

Simple Sparrow Care Farm offers mental health care, soothing experiences

BY ABBEY ARCHER

A 16-year-old boy was sitting in the waiting room with his hood on, unwilling to participate in his therapy. Marti Smith, occupational therapist and co-founder of Simple Sparrow Care Farm, observed that he was downregulated, feeling hopeless and depressed. She sent a text the farm's founder, Jamie Tanner, and told her to "get the ball python."

"The snake is a really upregulating animal," Ms. Tanner said.

She brought the snake over and sat with Ms. Smith. The whole session, they sat, talking about the snake within earshot of the boy. By the end, he was looking over at them with curiosity. Not once did they try to infringe on the boundary he was setting.

"We gave him voice and choice," Ms. Tanner said. "We didn't make it about him, we made it about community, we made it about the snake. We thought 'ok, you can sit in the hallway with your hoodie on, that's fine.'"

The next week, the boy chose to come back to Simple Sparrow Care Farm. He is now a regular client who has made therapeutic progress while caring for animals on the farm, Ms. Tanner said.

Simple Sparrow Care Farm is a nonprofit at 1601 County Road 107 in Hutto that offers a space for traumatized individuals to connect with nature. In addition to offering farm visits and opportunities to care for animals, the farm's "Bird House" staffs five full time therapists that provide reduced cost and free therapy.

"When we teach people how to care for the land, for the gardens and for the animals," Ms. Tanner said. "We observe that they are better able to care for themselves and others."

She said Simple Sparrow Care Farm tries to create a compassionate community for people who don't have that elsewhere. They serve people of all ages, ability and backgrounds with programs for preschoolers, elderly people and people who are LGBTQ.

The nonprofit's focus is on using the farm and nature for educational, therapeutic and vocational outcomes.

"We are constantly collecting [scientific] data," she said. "We want to ensure that our programs are being evaluated



PHOTOS BY ABBEY ARCHER

Jamie Tanner snuggles Houdini, one of her bunnies.

and demonstrate beneficial outcomes."

Ms. Tanner said interacting with animals on the farm helps to regulate the body and mind. She started Simple Sparrow Care Farm in 2017, after completing her masters degree in Organizational Leadership at Dallas Theological Seminary. She brought farm animals to Mitchell Elementary School in Georgetown and used them as an avenue to teach children to be self reflective and mindful of their behavior.

"When they could sit, be calm and hold the rabbit, I would say, 'You're doing so well with that rabbit. You're making that rabbit feel so safe. Tell me a story when somebody made you feel so safe,'" Ms. Tanner said. "We are teaching people how their own brain, mind and body processes trauma and how they can self regulate and co-regulate."

Ms. Tanner said Simple Sparrow uses a trauma-informed approach in everything that they do. As an ordained pastor, she offers pastoral care on the farm. She is currently in the revision stage of writing her dissertation for her Doctorate in Ministerial Education.

She has conversed with international care farm researchers who gave her their research instruments so that she was better able to measure the outcome of Simple Sparrow's programs.

"In Europe, they've been doing research on care farming for decades and they're way ahead of us," Ms. Tanner said. "The fact that we've been able to replicate the data is significant."

There are over 1,300 care farms in Holland. There are also care

farms in the U.K., Norway, Germany and Australia that provide education and vocational work for people who otherwise wouldn't have jobs. In Europe, equine therapy facilities fall under the designation of being a 'care farm' but there is not that classification in the US.

Ms. Tanner said Simple Sparrow's trauma-informed approach sets them apart from other care farms in the U.S. and Europe. Because of this, Simple Sparrow has had people from all around the world stay on the property as interns to observe their techniques.

Ms. Tanner is currently working with Nancy O'Meara Krenek, co-founder of Ride On Center for Kids, to form the Texas Care Farming Association. The purpose of the association would be to identify care farms within the state of Texas and provide them with support and education.

Last year, Simple Sparrow did a study with Southwestern University students that found a decrease in cortisol — a stress hormone — when someone was holding a rabbit. Ms. Tanner said that there are also neurological studies that show that when an Alzheimer's patient held a rabbit their verbal output increased.

"We did a survey last year, and one of the therapists told me that when she was just meeting clients in an office without activities outdoors, it would take eight to ten sessions before the client had a breakthrough," Ms. Tanner said. "But when she worked with new clients on the farm, they would have a breakthrough within three or four sessions. When they did outdoor activities during therapy, a sense of trust

was established more quickly."

Simple Sparrow typically receives visits from people who have experienced some type of trauma or are neurodivergent—suffering from conditions like autism, depression, anxiety and/or ADHD. Organizations they partner with include Key 2 Free, The Nest, Bluebonnet Trails, Magdalene House Austin and Family Recovery Court.

"The stories of the adopted animals really resonate with the foster and adoption families that we serve," Ms. Tanner said. "They are also seeking an environment where they can be loved and cared for, that is what we want to provide for these families."

The farm has also served as a low-stress place for children in the foster system to reunite with their biological parents. By participating in activities on the farm together, they may be able to more easily regulate their emotions and make difficult conversations easier.

"We work with both the parents and the children together to have moments and visitation time working through roadblocks when they do reunify," Executive Director Judy Holcomb said.

"We all lived through the pandemic," Ms. Tanner said. "But we see that some people came out a bit healthier than others. In a lot of people's cases, they didn't have a safe environment at home. A lot of kids weren't in that position, they were locked in with their abusers."

Ms. Tanner said healthy relationships provide a buffer to stress and trauma. Simple Sparrow Care Farm currently has a waitlist for financially assisted therapy.

"Our funding is needed, so needed," Ms. Holcomb said. "The need is growing for mental health resources. [...] If you look at where we are economically, a lot of focus has traditionally been on the poverty line. But in this economy, in the middle to lower middle class bracket, they make too much to qualify for any benefits. But all of their expenses have gone up and it makes it difficult for them to pay for extra things like therapy services. Therapy has become a burden on these families in this environment that we are living in, economically."

For information about Simple Sparrow Care Farm, visit www.simplesparrowfarm.com.



Jacopo the llama is the herd guard, and protects the farm's animals from coyotes and other predators. The farm is home to chickens, goats, sheep, dogs, cats, turkeys, geese, ducks, a tortoise, a python, honey bees and guinea fowl.

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