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Learning to Connect with Yourself, Then the World

greenchimneys.org

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Talk to any of Aidan’s peers, and they’ll say he is the nicest person they know. His social worker, Toni DeMato, agrees and also describes him as a “tentative participant,” quietly assessing a situation and then deciding how to be involved. But Aidan didn’t always have the ability to identify how his surroundings made him feel. “When faced with any one of many possible situations requiring interaction with others, Aidan would go inward,” says Toni. “He would not participate, not communicate; he would simply shut down. When asked what happened, he wouldn’t go back to the pain – he couldn’t bear revisiting it.”

Youth find their way to Green Chimneys following unique paths characterized by significant obstacles to success in their school and/or home communities. They come from all different backgrounds, family compositions, cultures, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. Their IQs and clinical diagnoses may vary but what they share is a core deficit in common skills. Our youth struggle with identifying and managing their emotions, establishing and maintaining

friendships and other relationships, and making positive, effective decisions. Development of these social-emotional skills becomes a focus for treatment, since without them, our youth will not experience improved behavior, gain confidence in expressing themselves, build personal relationships, and attain academic achievement.

Children start learning social-emotional skills from birth and further develop them with the help of their families, peers, and communities. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children, youth, and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills

Cheers to Green Chimneys’ staff who continue to go above and beyond to ensure our students and animals have the support they need.

The Value of Community

From Executive Director
Dr. Ed Placke

It is times like these that offer a new understanding of the word “community.” Many of us consider our community to consist of those we see or interact with regularly; social groups, coworkers, shop owners, team coaches, and so on. But community can apply to a shared experience, a reminder that we are truly part of something bigger.

Green Chimneys School closed on March 16, in accordance with all orders from our county and state. Prior to that we had eliminated public access to our campuses, taking every precaution we



could against the spread of COVID-19. Our commitment to the Green Chimneys community – our staff, our students, their families – is to ensure the safety and well being of all who come here.

I am honored to work with such a talented group of individuals who have demonstrated this from the moment we

began to plan our response to a rapidly escalating situation.

Since then, we have implemented policies and procedures to provide continuity of school instruction, full residential services, therapeutic support to our students and their families, care for our animals, and overall agency operation. I am grateful for what our staff, across all areas of the organization, have done during this unprecedented time.

We felt it was important to continue to share good news and information about our programs and people but have chosen to condense the print version of this particular issue. I encourage you to visit us online for more of our latest news at www.greenchimneys.org.

Best wishes to our entire Green Chimneys community, and beyond. And thank you for your support.

Social Emotional Learning

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necessary to manage emotions, develop healthy relationships, set and achieve positive goals, and show empathy and understanding.

In his Learn & Earn sessions at the farm, Aidan took an interest in plant care, including repotting and the different care specific plants require. He also learned how to build terrariums and decided to create one for his social worker Toni, and another for School IEP Coordinator Rachel Crognale. Seeing a change in his typical demeanor, Toni took the opportunity to ask how building terrariums and giving them to people made him feel. Aidan readily replied, “I love doing something good and then feeling good about it.”

Identifying and communicating feelings has been a big part of the social emotional learning Toni and Aidan have been working on. Making a terrarium requires Aidan to focus and have patience with himself; he becomes at ease enough to



recognize and talk about how he feels during the activity. Practicing this skill in a non-stressful setting teaches him to apply the same insight and self-awareness in an adverse situation. Developing his ability to recognize how circumstances around him, good or bad, affect him and make him feel, pave the way for him to manage his emotions or ask for the support he may need. Aidan and Toni have even identified places on campus or daily situations that are challenging for him, such as the

“lunch rush” in the dining hall. “I’m able to accompany him and observe his reactions, then we evaluate and discuss together, which helps Aidan to verbalize his feelings and plan his response,” Toni explains.

At Green Chimneys, SEL is integrated into all aspects of a student’s growth and development. Therapy groups teach emotion management, distress tolerance, personal effectiveness, and mindfulness. Effective problem-solving and decision-making skills are taught in classrooms, and when processing crisis situations with students. Classrooms and dorm units incorporate mindfulness activities to start their day, transition from after school, and at bedtime. Our nature-based programs provide opportunities to teach and model empathy, self-awareness, and impulse control by incorporating animals and elements of nature into classroom activities, counseling sessions, and regular jobs around the farm.

Learn about our integrated approach to therapeutic education and support at greenchimneys.org/school.

Animals Go To School, Too

Phoenix the camel has learned how to lay down on command. Benji the Brown Swiss steer accepts riders on his back. Rudi the rooster can identify colored blocks correctly when prompted. And Maximus the Sulcata tortoise follows a red plastic ball on a stick held by a student around obstacles.

How does one teach animals? At Green Chimneys, the animals of the Farm & Wildlife Center are valued partners and staff ensure the animals benefit as much from the interactions as the children do. Proper care and regular enrichment are part of providing animals an optimal quality of life.



We train our animals to participate in activities using positive and humane methods rooted in science. Repetition, gradual steps, lots of patience and encouragement make for amazing results. Of course involving the students in the process and teaching them “how” to train the animals, is one of the favorite activities for everyone.

What are the real reasons behind such training?

- Training enriches an animal’s world. Farm animals and other species are intelligent, enjoy new experiences, and like to be active. Expanding their routines enhances their day-to-day lives.
- Commands, such as *stand*, *sit*, and *pick up your feet* are the basics of making animal care less stressful. Medical treatments, hoof care and grooming are much easier when the animal understands what is being asked and willingly cooperates.
- Horses, cows and camels are large and powerful animals. Around people they must behave predictably or someone can get hurt. Teaching them that humans are both caregivers AND the “herd leader to be followed” keeps everyone safe.
- Animals that can do “things” when asked are more versatile and fun for our students to interact with. A cow to ride, a leash-trained goat to take on walks, or a llama that knows how to walk into buildings are animals the kids can engage with.



Nature-Based Research Published

Announcing the publication of first findings from a research partnership between Green Chimneys and University of Denver’s Institute for Human-Animal Connection. This multi-phase project is studying the impact of Green Chimneys’ farm programs on developmental health and education outcomes for its students; how nature-based activities support their therapeutic needs, and how they can be made even more effective. Visit greenchimneys.org/recent-findings

Talent Show with a Therapeutic Twist

Each winter, our dynamic team of recreational and art therapists organize the Annual Talent Show. It provides Green Chimneys School students, who struggle with social, emotional and learning challenges, an opportunity to take the stage. Their courageous acts of self-expression and triumphs of personal growth are awe-inspiring.



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Since the initial rumblings of the Coronavirus and its anticipated spread through New York and the nation, we've been humbled by an outpouring of concern and willingness to help. Thank you.

In any season, under any circumstance, the health and well-being of Green Chimneys students and animals remains our primary focus.

You, too, can support our children and animals with a gift to Green Chimneys. Take advantage of the return envelope inside or make a donation online at greenchimneys.org/give.

On behalf of our students and animals and the entire community, thank you!



For all the latest news, find us online:

