

LAKE COUNTY JOURNAL

FREE

Edition of September 22-September 28, 2011

News updated daily at LakeCountyJournal.com



Helping people grow Lamb's Farm reflects on 50 years in business | PAGE 3

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAMB'S FARM

Lambs Farm celebrates 50 years of service

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LIBERTYVILLE – Every weekday morning, Sue Hilliard gets ready for work just like anybody else. She wakes up on time, brushes her teeth, gets dressed and has breakfast before heading to her accounting job.

Being a resident and employee of Lambs Farm makes this daily routine possible for Hilliard, who is developmentally challenged.

Hilliard is one of about 140 residents and nearly 250 participants that use the services offered by Lambs Farm, a nonprofit organization that serves adults with developmental disabilities on a 72-acre campus in Libertyville.

Lambs Farm features a petting zoo, pet shop, thrift

Yaconetti said the 50th anniversary is also an opportunity to reach new generations and spread awareness of the depth of what Lambs Farm does for both the community and its participants— some of whom reside on the property and others who still live at home but commute to work at Lambs.

“If you would ask ‘Did you ever hear of Lambs Farm?,’ [many people] might say ‘Oh yeah, they have a petting zoo, I think they serve children there ... something about disabilities,’” Yaconetti said. “Most people that come don’t realize [we] have 140 people living on the back of the farm. We have a huge recreation program. Our people work out in the community, they pay taxes. We provide them with full life services that



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Ireland Lenz, 3, of Lake Villa, takes a break from brushing the sheep and goats to give one of the goats a hug in the petting area of the Farmyard at Lambs Farm in Libertyville on Sept. 17.

positive impression, said Melinda Agosto, assistant director of the child development center at the Central Lake

disabilities.

That was the first non-sheltered business that employed people with disabilities in the

ing on campus, there are that many more on a waiting list.

“We can’t get the funding from the state to build more residences,” she said.

She said 35 percent of Lambs Farm’s program isn’t eligible for state funding, and the organization relies on various donations and grants to cover that amount.

While Yaconetti said the organization is grateful to all of those who have helped it get to where it is today, she said an agency such as Lambs is always facing an uphill battle.

“It’s been a struggle to survive, and here we are 50 years later, and it’s still a struggle to survive,” she said.

Despite the recession, not one program has been canceled nor one person laid off, Yaconetti said.

participants that use the services offered by Lambs Farm, a nonprofit organization that serves adults with developmental disabilities on a 72-acre campus in Libertyville.

Lambs Farm features a petting zoo, pet shop, thrift shop, Country Inn Restaurant, Aunt Mary's Country Store and Bakery, a vocational work center and more for both its residents and the community.

This year, Lambs Farm is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and as part of the celebration, Lambs has retired its old logo for a new modern design that better reflects its true mission and purpose.

Dianne M. Yaconetti, president and CEO of Lambs Farm, said the old logo, which featured a barn, was ultimately misleading. She said the organization's new logo, which features the tagline, "where people grow," better represents all that Lambs has done and continues to do.

"The tagline was designed to merge what we do in the front [of the farm] with what we do in the back," Yaconetti said. "The 'where people grow' idea is not only do we provide programming for people with developmental disabilities who grow through that experience, but when we have visitors come, they grow too. Because they're exposed to our participants, they get a better understanding of what Lambs Farm is all about and they get a better appreciation for people with developmental disabilities."

Participants that use the services offered by Lambs Farm, a nonprofit organization that serves adults with developmental disabilities on a 72-acre campus in Libertyville. We have a huge recreation program. Our people work out in the community, they pay taxes. We provide them with full-life services that allow them to live lives that are happy and productive for them."

Hilliard said she came to Lambs about 30 years ago after graduating high school.

"I thought this place would be a nice place to live," Hilliard said. "I chose here because I like to be friends with people."

Residents have a variety of housing options, both on campus and in the community, depending on their needs.

Hilliard lives in the Stone Apartment Building on campus, which has apartments that feature a kitchen, living room, bedroom and bath for those who are able to live independently in a campus environment.

When talking about the different tasks she accomplishes while living at the apartments, she said, "We cook our own food, just like everybody else."

An early lesson

During a trip Sept. 21 to Lambs Farm, about 40 children between the ages of 3 and 5 visited Lambs on a Central Lake YMCA field trip.

Although the children might be too young to truly understand what it means to have a disability, experiences like these will help to leave a

positive impression, said Melinda Agosto, assistant director of the child development center at the Central Lake YMCA.

"I don't think they had any idea [the workers] were different, which I thought was awesome," Agosto said. "[They see that] they're not scary."

In one instance, she said, "They took a train ride, and the conductor was asking them what they want to be for Halloween. They really, really liked her. They had no idea she [had Down syndrome]."

She said the children really enjoyed the hands-on experience Lambs Farm offers.

"There were all kinds of different things to do," she said. "At the petting zoo, they were able to get right up close to the animals."

The field trip also complemented one of the YMCA's beliefs, said Anne O'Connell, vice president of marketing for the Lake County Family YMCA.

"We're a proponent of engaging everyone to the best of his abilities," O'Connell said.

Humble beginnings

In 50 years, Lambs Farm has come a long way. What is now known as Lambs Farm began as a small pet shop on north State Street in Chicago in 1961. The pet shop, owned by Bob Terese and Corrine Owen, employed 12 young adults with developmental

disabilities.

That was the first non-sheltered business that employed people with disabilities in the U.S., Yaconetti said.

"When Lambs Farm was originally founded, there was no special education," she said.

That pet shop moved to Libertyville in 1965, and it has been expanding ever since.

Mike Achtman is one of eight of those 12 original employees who still is with Lambs Farm today.

"I like my job," said Achtman, who is now semi-retired and works part-time at Lambs Industries, where he packages and performs other duties.

Achtman moved into the dorms at Lambs Farm's Libertyville location in 1976 and now lives in the Green-Field Residence, a senior care facility on campus.

Achtman, with a bright smile and kind blue eyes, said one of his favorite places to go to at Lambs is the Country Inn Restaurant.

"I get a tea and a snack ... a brownie sundae," he said.

Yaconetti said Lambs Farm has grown to be an agency that is looked upon as a model for services for this population of people.

"We set the standards for everybody else," she said.

A new generation

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ing, and here's a 50 years later, and it's still a struggle to survive," she said.

Despite the recession, not one program has been canceled nor one person laid off, Yaconetti said.

"We have a very creative staff of people who are always looking for ways to attract more people," she said. "Someone who comes to the Friday fish fry may not bring their grandchildren to the petting zoo; we have different customer bases."

Thanks to the community, donors and staff, Lambs Farm is moving forward with plans to bring new attractions to the campus, she said.

In the months to come, visitors can expect to see a visitors center. A tribute garden also is in the works for next spring. Both will help visitors and participants learn more about what Lambs Farm does and help them enjoy the campus.

Yaconetti said the site is regularly visited by families and by young students on field trips. She said in the future, she hopes to have more materials for older students and people to educate them about developmental challenges.

Overall, she said, the goals set forth by herself and the staff have been accomplished.

"I can't be happier," she said. "Because not only did we reach more people, but they understand it better; we've elevated our status in the community."

For more information, visit www.lambsfarm.org.

COVER PHOTO: Claudia Peterson, 2, of Lincolnshire, looks up at the cow and Muffin Man statues at Lambs Farm in Libertyville. Lambs Farm is celebrating its 50th anniversary this month.