

HORSES = HELP, HOPE AND HAPPINESS

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Holly Vogel '69 has made a positive difference for hundreds of children through an equine-centered therapy program that has become her life's work.



Holly Vogel '69 and her husband, Jim, at the Wellspring Farm Learning Center. (PHOTOS BY ROBERT CARLIN)

Some people who live near the woods look out their windows and see birds, squirrels and the leaves changing color with the seasons. But 12 years ago, Holly Leland Vogel '69 looked out the window of her Victorian home in Rochester, Massachusetts, and saw something else—a vision of horses and visually impaired children and lives being changed for the better. That vision became the Wellspring Farm Learning Center (www.wellspringfarmlearningcenter.com), an experiential therapy facility that has grown far beyond her initial idea and created a unique venue from which she and her husband, Jim, could spend their “retirement” serving those with special needs.

Their ability to turn the idea for Wellspring Farm into a reality grew in part from Jim's work with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. “We worked like crazy making contacts with

organizations and folks Jim had developed over the years,” says Vogel. “In six short months, we had a full schedule of kids at our facility.” While Wellspring Farm began as a program for visually impaired children, it quickly grew into a multi-service life skills training program for children and young adults with a variety of disabilities. “Rather than a program of therapy within the confines of four walls, we provide a unique opportunity of therapy utilizing the farm, horses and the environment,” she says.

Through the use of hippotherapy—the use and study of a horse’s movement as a treatment strategy—Wellspring Farm’s programs include behavioral therapy, outdoor enrichment and nature studies, and sensory integration. The facility is certified by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a group practice, healthcare provider and vendor, and works with a variety of licensed specialists, including psychiatrists and psychologists, physical and occupational therapists, and social workers. Vogel and her husband have expanded the facility to include walking trails, an outdoor classroom and an authentic Sioux tepee that provides sensory integration experience for children on the autism spectrum. “We also work with many school systems and provide after-school programming—the children can actually receive credit for attending the learning center here,” says Vogel, who adds that many children discharged from hospitals have recommendations in their discharge plans to attend Wellspring Farm. “We can cater to individual needs and provide a positive and effective program of learning and behavioral therapy that is specific and prescribed.”



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— Holly Leland Vogel '69
Wellspring Farm Learning Center

Vogel started her career working with children after receiving degrees from Rivier in music education and performance. Hired by the Worcester (Mass.) public schools, she taught elementary school music for seven years, then opened a private music studio after her children, Gretchen and Meaghan, were born. She continued to teach, both privately and as a substitute in public schools, as her family moved to different towns in Massachusetts, and she became the choir director for several churches. Her work also included, at various times, painting boats and making English crumpets for a local restaurant; she also ran a number of marathons and road races. After the family moved to Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, she and her husband spent a great deal of time in their cabin cruiser and she became the first woman Squadron Commander of the Buzzards Bay Power Squadron. She even owned a restaurant called Hollyberry’s that was named one of the best on the up-per Cape two years in a row.

When it became clear that Well-spring Farm was going to be more than just a vision, she and her husband turned it into the main focus of their lives. He retired from his position, she sold her restaurant and they sold their boat. After clearing the woods and hiring contractors to build the barn, they designed the therapeutic pro-gram themselves and purchased some horses. In a 2006 article in the *New Bedford*

Standard-Times, Vogel described the relationship between horses and humans, particularly children, as spiritual, believing that the animals know to be kind and gentle in ways that other animals do not. The horses are still the center of the program at Wellspring Farms: “We currently have eight horses, ponies and mini-ponies— all sizes to take care of individual needs and circumstances,” says Vogel. She says riding comprises about 20 percent of the therapy they provide, and each horse has its own individual Victorian barn, which she says presents a less intimidating and smaller setting for the children, particularly those with autism, to observe and participate with the animals.

Eleven years after Wellspring Farm opened its doors, it serves more than 40 state agencies, school districts and private organizations under contract as a therapy provider. The facility has a long waiting list of clients, and the Vogels created a non-profit foundation, the Wellspring Farms Foundation, to provide scholarship programs for children who cannot afford their services, as well as expand the environmental education program and, eventually, open a second facility. Wellspring Farms has become an all-encompassing passion for the Vogels, but they continue to carve out time for their hobbies. “We do get up each morning at 3:00 to take care of the horses, then out for a run—averaging 45 to 50 miles per week—then back to clean up and start the day with students,” says Vogel, whose 4:25 time places her first or second in her age group and qualifies her for the Boston Marathon. She has also had several showings of her oil paintings, is active in her church and enjoys spending time with her four grandchildren.

More than 40 years after leaving Rivier, Vogel still sings its praises. “My life has been filled with glorious experiences and successes, most of which have presented themselves as a result of the solid foundation I earned as an energetic student at Rivier,” says Vogel. “My experience at Rivier gave me such a growth experience during those marvelous years on campus and enabled me to grow in confidence and as a person of worth, with much capability to move ahead in life and conquer whatever plans or direction I chose to take.” Her advice to today’s students is simply to work hard and have strong faith in God and one’s own abilities. “Good things will come, they will make their mark on society and truly make a difference for others. I know I have been blessed to have attended a great institution, and carry with me each day a true feeling of gratitude for the wonderful life experience, education and strengthening of faith. This has helped to carry me through my life to this day.” ■

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