

Sarah's Smile campers visit with animals

How did Sarah's Smile kickoff its 2007 summer program? With Pearl and Leroy, the potbellied pigs of course.

On July 17th, Pearl and Leroy, along with their livestock friends from Gress Mountain Ranch, greeted the 157 children participating in the six-week Sarah's Smile program at the Child Development and Therapeutic Rehabilitation Center (CDTRC) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

By interacting with the animals, the children further develop their communication and focusing skills, according to Sarah's Smile site supervisor Alexis Bennett-Dempsey. "It's definitely a positive experience for the children to have the chance to be around the animals," she said.

While a few children curled up next to Rocky and Kayla, the two Great Pyrenees dogs, others waited anxiously for their turns to take a ride around the yard on the cart pulled by JoJo and Cecely the donkeys. Along with the pigs, dogs, and donkeys, three goats and two alpacas rounded out the make-shift petting zoo.

Sarah's Smile participant Joseph especially liked the alpacas. "When you say something to them, they answer back," he said.

Gress Mountain Ranch owner Kathryn Jean Gress says she has always possessed a passion for animals. Since 2002, she and her husband Ben have rescued nearly 30 abandoned and unwanted animals, offering both large and small creatures "forever" homes at their Orefield

sanctuary. With the help of numerous student volunteers and community donations, the animals are then trained to interact with humans young and old.

"We promote a win-win situation, in which we are people helping animals and training them to help people," Gress said. "We are truly a place where people help animals and animals help people."

Third-grader James is not only a Sarah's Smile participant, but he also volunteers at the ranch, offering Gress his help and gaining knowledge about the

various animals.

"I love working with all of the animals," said James, who Gress said is one of her hardest workers. "It's

fun working with them."

In past years, Sarah's Smile program managers tried to coordinate a visit by the animals of Gress Mountain Ranch at their summer program, but this is the first summer the arrangement was successful.

Gress, the children, and the animals alike would agree that the event was meaningful for everyone involved.

"I enjoy the integration of all kinds of people and animals," Gress said. "It's very, very rewarding to see the impact the animals have on the children, and vice versa."



Sarah's Smile campers enjoy a morning in the sun with Pearl and Leroy, the potbellied pigs, and a friendly goat from Gress Mountain Ranch.

