

On the Farm & From the Garden

New Work for a Couple of Old Hands



Mike at the barn

Effective July 1, North Country School and Camp Treetops welcomed new leadership to the farm and garden program. Former NCS faculty members Mike and Kat Tholen took on new positions: he as farm manager and she as farm educator and riding director. For the previous four years, the husband-wife team served as co-teachers for the school's Level I, the combined self-contained classroom for 4th and 5th graders.

Both Tholens love teaching, "but there's been a huge hole in our lives," Mike says. Adds Kat, "farming is our passion—it's how we first met. Mike is in his element being outdoors, and I've been aching to get back to it."

Mike and Kat each have extensive prior experience as farm managers, including positions at North Country School and Camp Treetops (Kat arrived a dozen years ago as a CTT riding instructor then later worked on the farm), Linden Hill School in Northfield, MA, and Frost Valley YMCA Farm in the Catskills. They also spent time on a horse ranch and organic farm in Colorado.

"Because the farm and garden program is so essential to the learning and growth we provide for students and campers," said David "Hock" Hochschartner, Head of School and Camp, "I am delighted to have Mike and Kat in this crucial role. Their experience in the classroom brings an added dimension to their already impressive farming skills."

The Tholens bring ambitious goals to their new jobs. Chief among them is to integrate farm and garden activities, with a focused educational component, to make the programming more holistic, coherent, and intentional.

One of the models they hope to establish in the coming year, for instance, is a sheep-to-shawl program. First they plan to expand the existing flock of sheep, acquiring more ewes from hearty breeds known for good wool. Students would be involved in caring for the animals, shearing the wool, then carding and washing, spinning, and dyeing it. Dyes would come from perennial plants harvested from a campus dye garden, created especially for that purpose. Finished wool would be used by students and campers for knitting, felting, crocheting, or weaving projects in fiber arts classes or sold by the skein in the campus store.

"Many of the pieces for this kind of programming are already in place," Mike says, pointing to already vibrant fiber arts programs at School and Camp. "We just need to close the loop and put them altogether."

The aim is to boost sustainability and to make the purpose behind farming endeavors more visible. For instance, after the Camp and School chicken harvests, Mike hopes to have a special barbecue lunch for the super senior campers and students most involved, to foster awareness and pride in production of our own poultry and meat. "If there's no end-product," Kat points



out about raising animals, “then kids feel like they’re just going to the barn to shovel more manure.”

In her role as farm educator, Kat hopes to work with teachers to enhance their existing curriculum with experiential, farm-based activities and lessons. She met with interested staff during the faculty orientation in September to discuss possibilities. Besides Colette Wilson’s longstanding Lettuce Learn Math unit for Level II, Dave Steckler planned a cost analysis of NCS pork production for his Level III math class. Kat also envisions a farm elective co-taught with interns Emily and Laura that combines farm art with animal and garden activities.

In addition, Kat aims to network with other school farms, develop more fully the intern experience for apprentices working on campus, and start a riding instructor program, where staff would train students and campers to teach riding to their younger peers and staff children.

If that sounds like a lot to do, it is. “Having a dedicated position for a farm educator makes a huge difference,” Mike explains. “Every day brings a couple of things you don’t expect—that’s farming” he says. “But the time they take up generally would come at the expense of what Kat is now able to do—coordinating with teachers, developing curriculum or new programming, researching grants—so having her position is key.”

With new farm personnel, change is inevitable. “You ask ten farmers the same question, and you’ll get ten different answers,” Mike says, acknowledging as well that change is never easy. “You have to sit down with people and let them know what you want to do—and why. Usually, once they understand, they’ll support what you’re doing. But you have to put in the time and

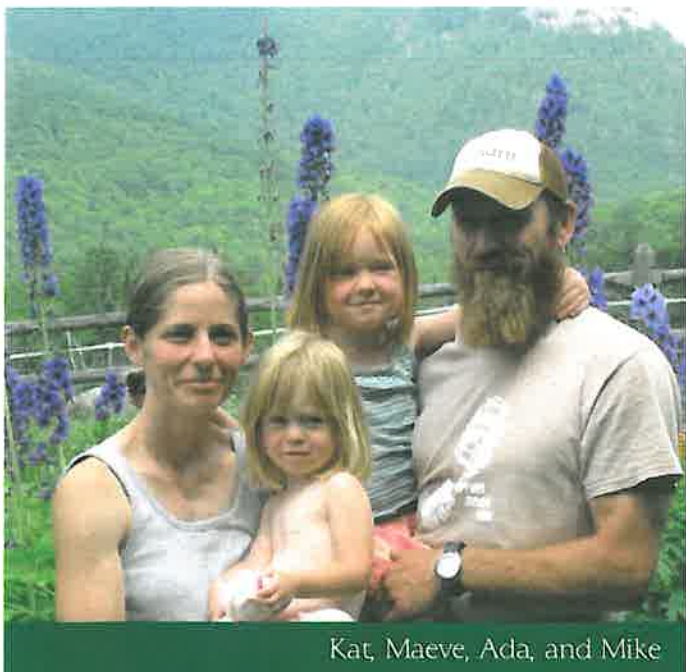
effort to make people aware.”

Some ideas take more persuasion than others. Few would argue with the Tholens’ vision of a community supported agriculture program for faculty who stay on campus during the summer months or of developing specialty products besides maple syrup—apple cider, hand-knit hats and scarves, raspberry jam, or goats milk soap—for our School and Camp communities.

“We also want to get away from the idea that everything farm-related is all hard work,” Kat says. “There are plenty of enjoyable things to do—like making lip balm, pressing flowers.” But even fun activities can and should have a purpose, she adds.

And the purpose behind most of the Tholens’ plans is to make better use of the abundant resources on our own 200-acre campus. Take, for instance, their aim to harvest more perennial crops. “We’ll always have field greens, carrots, summer squash, and other annuals,” Mike says. “But why not expand the rhubarb, add asparagus and raspberry patches, and plant more fruit trees? With perennials, there’s no tilling the soil or buying and planting seeds every spring, so we get a better quality output with fewer inputs. It’s about better utilizing the resources we have.”

Values like sustainability and responsible land use are becoming more mainstream these days, Mike notes. “Edible landscapes, permaculture, extensive composting, local food sources—all these supposedly ‘new’ trends have become popular lately,” he says, “but we’ve been doing these kinds of progressive farming and educational practices since 1921. We just don’t talk about it much. I’d like to see North Country School and Camp Treetops become a model or demonstration site. We should be letting others know what we’ve got here.” 🌱



Kat, Maeve, Ada, and Mike

Food for Thought

Recommendations from the Tholens’ Book Shelf

The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience, by Rob Hopkins

Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future, by Bill McKibben

Omnivore’s Dilemma and *In Defense of Food*, by Michael Pollan

Childhood and Nature, by David Sobel

