



Critter Barn: Their Journey To Inclusivity



By Mary Rottschafer | Executive Director, Critter Barn

Our guest at a traveling event is looking forward to the new farm.

The Motive

A group of Ottawa Area Center students, who were wheelchair users, came to the Critter Barn for a field trip. I admired their patience because the bus lift lowered each student one by one. It took time.

We introduced our guests to chicks, bunnies, and little goats, but the bus driver's words ended our fun too soon, "It's time to start loading." Tube-feeding, diaper changes, and personal needs demanded a timely return to their school.

The Problems

Before we designed our new farm, I met with faculty from Ottawa Area Center to learn about where they take their students. They explained there were no public places that accommodate their students' needs, so all outings had to

return to the school in time for their eating and bathroom routines. ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, does not work for everyone.

I also met with Lucia Rios' friends, *the Able Body Bloggers*, who shared their ADA troubles. From automatic door buttons for a man with vision impairments to the awkwardness of a barely accessible bathroom stall for a woman who needed other people to assist in that small space to a woman with quadriplegia, explaining how a shorter drinking fountain only gives her a shower... Each person told me about what does not work for them.

The Commitment

While teaching how farmers raise our food is our educational goal, it's the connection with animals and nature that touches people's hearts.

Our Mission states: Critter Barn is an educational farm dedicated to teaching about farming and agriculture while inspiring people of all ages, and all abilities, through the miracles in nature found at the farm.

Animals helping people with disabilities is not a new concept. Doctors and therapists have reported on the social and emotional benefits of animals for humans for decades (Fine, 2010; Ormerod, Edney, Foster, & Whyham, 2005; Raupp, 2002).

In the 1990's we began our Barnyard Crew, enabling hundreds of young people and adults with a disability, yet who were mobile, to volunteer. Working with animals is beneficial. Human-animal interactions improve intellectual and social outcomes in youth including their capacity for directed attention, increased problem-solving, communication, and behavioral management (Annerstedt & Wahrborg, 2011). Along with the fact from the CDC that one-in-four people in the US have a disability that impacts mobility, cognition, vision, or hearing, we prioritized accessibility.

The Plan

Michael Perry, from Progressive AE outlined the requirements for Universal Design while ideas and direction came from Lori's Voice, Lakeshore Disability Network, Mary Free Bed Guild, Junior Welfare League, and the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation.

"Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability."

www.universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design



One of our new barns.

By combining the benefits of Universal Design at our new farm, along with a Resource Room, sidewalks everywhere, adaptive equipment from the Rifton Company, and inclusive playground equipment from Game Time, Critter Barn is creating a first-of-its-kind facility.

My name is Mary Rottschafer. I'm a teacher who uses a farm, animal interactions and daily farm chores to enrich people's lives. I have a BA in music and elementary education from Hope College, taught 3rd and 4th grades, vocal choirs, instrumental groups, and coordinated music programming.

Critter Barn is an educational farm offering hands-on experiences to people of all ages and all abilities. It's a unique, welcoming destination that teaches about agriculture while reconnecting people with the natural world. Growing attendance and a commitment to accessibility have fueled a major expansion, supported by philanthropists and Agricultural organizations.



This is a photograph of some of the Adaptive Equipment from the Rifton Equipment company that will be available at our new farm.



"Why are we doing something as far reaching as Universal Design? Actually, why not? And when others see and understand the blessing of no barriers... hopefully we'll inspire others to go the extra mile and create a better environment at their facility for those who need our help." – Mike Rotman, Teacher leading the class above

"All individuals want the opportunity to participate in their communities, and individuals with significant disabilities are no exception. The decision by Critter Barn to construct space and programs that incorporate universal design features is monumental. Individuals with disabilities, living in and visiting western Michigan now have greater access to an interactive learning and recreational opportunity."

— Stacey Trowbridge, Lakeshore Disability Network

The Result

We anticipate a mutually beneficial opportunity, shared by all through learning, hands-on experiences, and enjoying the world of nature at a farm, whose facility serves everyone in the spirit of unconditional acceptance.

