

Former Inpatient Certified Child Life Specialist finds a new home for her skills on a farm and reconnects children and families (and herself) with the healing power of nature.

Breanne Mathers is a Certified Child Life Specialist who previously worked for nine years at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital as the Inpatient CCLS for the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Team and Complex Continuing Care. In 2015, Breanne and her business partner, Stephanie Deaken, a registered Social Worker, officially opened Fiddlehead Care Farm (FCF) north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. FCF is a 50 acre fully accessible organic farm focused on providing innovative therapy for children, youth and young adults with special needs to help them reach their potential and become their best self. The programs are targeted at improving children's physical, spiritual, psychosocial and/or mental health. (www.fiddleheadcarefarm.com)

FCF's mission is to give children, youth and young adults (birth-25 years old) with varying abilities and their families the opportunity to learn, experience and grow without boundaries through innovative animal-assisted therapy and nature-based education, rehabilitation and recreation. Fiddlehead Care Farm's (FCF) goal is to harness the healing and calming properties of nature to improve quality of life and restore the body and spirit.

How did the idea for FCF get started?

The idea for FCF was born from a combination of the passion and interest shared by Stephanie and myself to the clients and families we serve, noticeable gaps in the community and the emergence of research around the importance of access to and exploration of nature for all people but particularly children.

The foundations for Fiddlehead Care Farm were laid many years ago during a number of talks over dinner about our long term dreams. Stephanie and I were co-workers at Holland Bloorview but also great friends who shared a love of the outdoors and saw first hand the power of nature and animals for healing, calming and to enhance coping. We saw and heard from kids and families about their struggles returning to the community after an inpatient stay. There was a lack of quality and variety in community programming and even when they found the right fit, accessibility and inclusion based on their needs was often an issue.

Pair all of this with the growing body of evidence around care farming, green care, the importance of nature in development and healing and the beginnings of social prescriptions for time in nature by doctors in other areas of the world and Stephanie and I were motivated to create a therapeutic farm for kids and families with a variety of needs.

What child life skills came in handy when starting up this kind of endeavor?

I have to admit, moving out of the hospital and into a community setting was a steep learning curve but was very exciting. There are many child life skills which helped ease the transition and support the successful start up of FCF. For me, the most useful skills were flexibility, passion and belief in the power of child life intervention, ability to think on your feet and adapt to any situation and a laser focus on client and family centred care.

All of the skills from my hospital experience were readily transferable and applicable to the farm environment. During the planning of the property and the implementation of the programs, my previous experience in creating and maintaining safe, accessible, therapeutic and healing settings and child and family friendly environments has been of the utmost importance. The ability to run individual and group programs which meet the goals and needs of each participant is paramount to our success as well as my continued focus on collaborating with all members of the clients' larger team and community partners. I do believe the key to my

success thus far is the solid foundation I built in the nine years I spent in the formal setting of a hospital, tuning my skills and building my repertoire and confidence in preparation for community work.

Many of the goals set by the clients and families and as a result of my assessments are very similar to the goals I set for children in the hospital setting. Most client goals relate to therapeutic play opportunities to decrease distress and increase coping, non-pharmacological pain, stress, anxiety and nausea management, teaching and practicing life skills and independence skills, diagnostic teaching and/or facilitation of multi-sensory experiences. I have also seen a large number of clients who have experienced grief, loss and/or bereavement after a death, separation, divorce, relocation, etc. who really benefit from the play, animal and nature based modalities we offer. The goals are the same but the way I target and achieve those goals in the FCF setting may be somewhat different based on the unique setting and offerings of our farm.

What obstacles did you overcome to building the business?

There have been many obstacles and lesson learned. One of the first hurdles was finding the perfect property to support our vision of accessibility, freedom and therapeutic value. This process took almost a year of research, showings, budgeting and dreaming before we found the perfect property which continues to impress and surprise and charm us every day.

The second barrier we had to overcome was Stephanie and my lack of hands on farming experience. My parents are amazing and passionate gardeners so I have been around gardening and have had small produce gardens for as long as I remember. But Fiddlehead Care Farm takes gardening and farming to a new level which is way out of my comfort zone. Luckily for me, Stephanie's husband, Darryl grew up on a local dairy farm and therefore he is what I like to call the brains and brawn behind the large scale farming and maintenance of Fiddlehead Care Farm. Being a mostly outdoor facility, it has been a very big learning experience to manage and problem solve unpredictable and bad weather and to modify programming and scheduling for the changing seasons.

Being the first care farm in Canada, we needed to reach out and build a network with people in other countries for support, mentoring, research, etc. (<http://www.carefarminguk.org/> and <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>) We realized the importance of education and taking the time to personally visit with community agencies and referral partners as well as individual families to educate and answer question not only about the role and benefits of Child Life but also about care farming in general and FCF's specific philosophy and programs. We are a fee for service program so funding consistently is an issue but luckily, through partnerships with community organizations, we have been successful in assisting families to obtain funding through government funding and third party insurance.

These barriers were all anticipated but we have also had to overcome some unexpected obstacles. One such challenge has been perfecting the right verbiage to explain our programs to the clients and families in our community. Coming from an inpatient rehabilitation hospital in a large city, clients and families were generally largely open to help and though had great hopes for their child's recovery, already had a diagnosis and were able to acknowledge their child's need. FCF's location in a more rural area adds an extra dimension where "special needs" is a scary and negative word and some families do not acknowledge their family or child's need for services. We have encountered many children with anxiety disorders, learning disabilities or children on the autism spectrum, etc. who have yet to be officially assessed or diagnosed and/or whose parents do not categorize them as having any special needs. Stephanie have shifted our presentation of our programming to be more inclusive and focus on the benefits of nature and animals for people of all ages and abilities. We focus

on the idea that everyone has unique needs, everyone could benefit from the chance to get out in nature and we all need some work on skills around dealing with big emotions, making friends and self esteem.

Why is nature so important for all children?

Exposure to and exploration in nature is important to every child's development. Nature is where children learn, grow and practice skills. Whether it is through free play and exploration or a more facilitated experience, children can develop a special connection to their environment and take part in the a completely immersive sensory experience; seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, manipulating and exploring. Nature can also be the ultimate form of loose parts play with every leaf, branch, canopy, stump, animal or insect being available for their use and the only limitation is the far reaches of their imagination.

American Author and Journalist, Richard Louv (<http://richardlouv.com/>) coined the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" in 2005 to describe the wide range of behavioural, psychosocial and emotion effects on human beings, especially children, as a result of spending less time outdoors.

Persons with disabilities, especially kids, tend to be more isolated, and participate less in social and community activities or play outside and explore their world with their peers. Accessing nature and recreation in their community is often difficult. At FCF, we attempt to remove all boundaries, judgements and barriers to free participation for children, adolescents and young adults and their families and provide an environment to allow kids to be kids no matter their abilities or needs.

FCF therapists provide thoughtful exposure to nature and use it as a partner in the therapeutic process. FCF uses a holistic definition of "nature" being the environment as well as the therapy animals we have on site. We believe that nurturing and caring for the environment, plants and animals equals nurturing the body and soul and we are seeing this change each and every time a client or family visits the farm. As more attention is being paid to what we put in, on and around our bodies in terms of chemicals, hormones, etc. it has been important for us to have and maintain our Certified Organics status. This way the staff and families can be confident that the clients can play, explore and even eat right out of the raised gardens without being exposed to harmful chemicals.

Why are animals such a central part of your program?

Ask anyone who has pets at home, animals can be wonderful friends and healers. We work to take this benefit one step further to implement animal-assisted therapy (AAT) on the farm. AAT is a type of therapy that involves animals as a form of treatment and its goal is to improve a person's physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning.

At Fiddlehead Care Farm, we have cows, calves, chickens, a wonderful farm dog named Mocha and Luna, the therapy mini pig who is a highlight for most visitors. The therapeutic values of animals are immense and the benefits can be seen in each and every session with the animals. Not only are these animals interesting and novel to many children but they are also supportive of improvements in every domain.

Caring for animals is an important responsibility and the role of feeding, brushing, holding and other care of the animal give the child a special routine to follow or look forward to. These skills also have benefits in other areas such as fine motor skills, sequencing, communication and social and life skills. Our popular "Pigs and Pages" program where children read stories to Luna has resulted in numerous reports of improvements in confidence reading aloud and quality of speech from participants' family, teachers and therapy teams.

Providing a non-human buddy to relate to often elicits wonderful verbal and non verbal communication where feelings can be shared. This is especially powerful when individuals are not very responsive to verbal communications or are coping with a variety of emotions or stressors. We have had many instances when children have talked to the animals and confided in them about feelings, events, worries and/or stressors that they have not told anyone else. The presence of animals can be a powerful and freeing experience.

It is no surprise that these animals become the child's best friends very quickly and the animals provide companionship, unconditional love, and reduce loneliness. The non-judgemental nature of the animals means the child always feels accepted and they are in control of the situation and activities. Families and children report a sense of relaxation, joy and reduction of stress after spending time with the animals on site.

What are your biggest hopes for children and families you serve?

I have lots of hopes and dreams for the children and families FCF serves. The main goal is that children are truly able to "grow and experience without boundaries." Stephanie and my job is to facilitate the child and family's experience and to remove boundaries whether they are physical, psychosocial, spiritual, cognitive, etc. I hope their visits to FCF foster a sense of wonder, creativity, questioning, curiosity and a deeper connection to the natural environment. I hope they can gain knowledge, self confidence, patience and pride in their work by getting dirty through touching, feeling and experiencing and having a sense of choice and control.

My ultimate hope for my private one-to-one clients is that I work myself out of a job by meeting all the therapeutic goals of the client and family but to remain in their lives as a resource and positive influence and that they continue to visit the farm with their family for day visits so I can see their progress.

What are your plans for the future?

As a new business, it has been incredible to have met and changed the lives of many people in the community. We have seen children and their families be able to become their best selves with the healing powers of nature. It is amazing to see the process of freedom and "letting go" a walk in the woods can bring to someone dealing with anxiety or the calm and focus that can be brought to someone with ADHD in the gardens. We are so appreciative of the enthusiasm and support we have been receiving from the community and we are looking forward to having many more inspiring experiences in the future.

We have many plans for the future including expanding our forest walking trails, enhancing our sensory garden and building more indoor multi-use spaces. We are working on developing formal life skills programs and employment opportunities for young adults and will continue to partner with community agencies to co-create programs to fill gaps in the community.

Our other major goals are around education so we hope to begin hosting educational workshops and retreats for families as well as professionals and focus on contributing to the growing body of research supporting the substantial benefits of Care Farming, the immense power of nature and animals and the importance of nature in child development.

For more information, comments or questions, please visit the Fiddlehead Care Farm website at www.fiddleheadcarefarm.com or email us at fiddleheadcarefarm@gmail.com

About the author

Breanne Mathers previously worked for nine years as a Certified Child Life Specialist at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital as part of the Inpatient Brain Injury Rehabilitation team as well as the Complex

Continuing Care Unit. She has a Bachelor is Arts in Sociology and a Post-Graduate diploma in Therapeutic Recreation and is dually qualified as a Certified Child Life Specialist and Therapeutic Recreation Specialist. Breanne has vast experience working with children and youth with traumatic and acquired brain injury and children with complex medical issues, multi system diseases and mechanical ventilation. She has set herself apart as a leading expert and consultant on the use of Multi-Sensory Environments and Snoezelen with children with disabilities and as the author of a variety of peer reviewed journal articles she continues to push forward her passion for the teaching and use of non-pharmacological pain management techniques.