

Three Myths about Farms and Ranches

By Mari-Anne Kehler

Last March Golden Heart Ranch's FRED (Farms and Ranches Enabling those with Disabilities) Conference hosted hundreds of parents, professionals and special needs adults in Manhattan Beach, California to discuss a looming crisis: quality living options for special needs adults. Experts in the field came to share what they know. With the expectation that we'll have well over 1 million special needs children moving into adulthood in the next decade – 800,000 of those with autism – the need to create opportunities for their future is long overdue.

In the last decade, the impact of autism births has been so profound that most of us were frantically focused on early intervention, research, and creating educational and social programs that would fill the immediate void for those impacted. While we exhausted ourselves with that effort, the numbers kept growing! And poof – now we're looking at an army of grown-ups who deserve the opportunity to live productive and meaningful lives as adults.

Over 80% of adults with special needs never leave their aging parents' homes. Why? Because there aren't adequate options available. There are waiting lists and red tape and bureaucratic discouragements. FRED Conference was born in an effort to make accessible the information needed for action, as well as to build a coalition of those who can advance adult living opportunities efficiently – and quickly.

FRED did indeed spark a flame of excitement. As a result of the conference, many satellite groups are now forming to get smarter about what is needed and band together to create more adult life options. But questions still exist about farms and ranches as a viable model, including some longstanding myths that need debunking:

Myth #1: Farms and Ranches Are Isolated Institutions

This is the most common myth going. The reality is this: after age 21, special needs adults' opportunities for social and recreational interactions fall right off a cliff. Programs dry up. Funding is scarce. Employment data is abysmal. In contrast, farms and ranches are thriving beehives of activity that draw from the surrounding community to partake in the lives of the residents. The whole point in site selection for such programs and options is to ensure the ability to create interactivity with the local community and develop ways the “farmers” can be well included within their surroundings. Crafts shops, cafes, equestrian services and the like are the norm for existing farms and ranches, inviting the local community to be a part of their lives. Not surprisingly, when you speak to locals in such a community, you will find they love that their town has a place that includes our farmers! Who wouldn’t? Unlike some living environments that feature “independence”, we need to remember that particularly with autism, finding opportunities for “interdependence” are critical. Many parents and adult autistics living at home or independently report signs of loneliness and depression stemming from a need to access a community of peers and meaningful employment contributions. We need to re-think which models truly offer connection and promote health.

Myth #2: Farms and Ranches Are the Best Options Going

We have started to move away from the term “Farms and Ranches” and instead prefer the term “Village Communities”. It better defines what the model is all about: communities of adults, who together can create meaningful ways to live, socialize and contribute to society. This model includes a place to live with peers, appropriate work experiences and recreational opportunities in one village setting. And it can be rural or urban! You don’t need acres of farmland upon which to build a community that offers meaningful activity. Farms and ranches happen to be particularly viable as a setting because they have many jobs at all levels of ability. Social and recreational opportunities easily present themselves when you are interdependent, working together in nature. But they aren’t the only approach. The key is to identify activities that provide natural ways each person can contribute with dignity and build self-esteem. So while farms and ranches might be well suited to do that, the same outcome can be achieved in an urban or beach setting too. It is a model that can be replicated as a farm in Ohio, a ranch in Texas or an urban village setting in Northern California. The results are the same: adults with special needs live in community with their surrounding neighbors, thriving and growing, thanks to built-in employment, recreational and social opportunities. And, yes, it does take a village.

Myth #3: There’s No Easy Way to Learn About What Options are Available

In the last year or so, there’s been an explosion of information made available about transition to adulthood and living options. The FRED Conference in particular was created to assist everyone interested in Village Communities to get up to speed quickly, to meet others with similar ideas and to help those who want to learn from experts in the

field. The FRED 2012 Conference video, available online at www.FREDconference.org, provides a wealth of information, including a map of existing Farms and Ranches in the US and Canada. In addition, many newly developing village communities are in the works. Also, check out <http://ac-aa.org/> for information specific to agricultural communities for adults with autism. Finally, get active. Find out how you can ensure the best quality living options are being made available that include not just residential, but employment, social and recreational opportunities for adults with autism.

Mark your calendar and save the date

FRED 2013 Conference: March 1, 2013

Manhattan Beach, CA

www.FredConference.org

About the author:

A parent of a 16 year old with autism, Mari-Anne Kehler serves on non-profit boards devoted to education and the special needs community, including as previous President of the Los Angeles Chapter of *Autism Speaks*. Currently she is an Advisory Board member of *Golden Heart Ranch* and directs the FRED Conference.