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In Good Hands



Farm animals get a new lease on life at Uplands
PEAK Sanctuary

By Shawndra Miller

Pull into the lane at Grandview Road, outside Salem, and you'll be greeted by an unusual sight as a couple of full-grown pigs run to the gate to meet you.

Welcome to Uplands PEAK Sanctuary, Indiana's only sanctuary dedicated to farm animals. Here rescued animals like Vegan, a young steer, and Tulip, a sow, will live their days under the care of co-founders Michelle and Mark Pruitt. PEAK stands for "People, Earth and Animals In Kinship," and the couple's kinship with their furred and feathered charges is clear when they take guests on a tour.

"Tulip was depressed when she came," Mark says, opening the gate and entering the enclosure. "Her eyes were sunken like a depressed person's." The 450-pound pinkish pig approaches him with the air of a congenial auntie, as if she knows that she's won some kind of sweepstakes. As he scratches her

underside, Tulip lowers her hefty body to her knees and then rolls on her side in the straw. Her ear flap covers her eye, so it's impossible to tell if it's sunken or not, but she appears to be smiling as she relaxes into the tummy rub. Her sow "sister," Lucy, roots in the straw around her companionably. (The two pigs came from different situations, but quickly bonded as buddies.)

Galvanized by their conviction that animals' lives should be respected, the couple founded the nonprofit on the principles of veganism. Rescuing abused and neglected farm animals is primary, but they are also passionate about the sanctuary's mission to promote a vegan lifestyle.

By simply sharing stories of the animals they've taken in, the Pruitts invite others to reconsider their food choices.

Hundreds of visitors and volunteers come to the facility to get acquainted with animals who otherwise would have perished. Like Annie and Andy, sibling pigs who ran away from the Minneapolis backyard where they were being fattened for a family barbecue. They were the first animals to find refuge here and now share digs with five other pigs, three goats, a calf and a rooster named Nigel – with room for more.

Though neither of the co-founders has farming experience, they've learned from others in the business of creating safe havens for farm animals. Michelle completed a seven-week internship at Woodstock Farm Sanctuary in New York, and they have close ties with the founder of the Pig Preserve in Tennessee. Combining those resources with on-the-job learning, lots of reading and plain old determination, they've carved out a unique destination – a twist on agritourism.

With help from volunteers, the couple put in the fencing for the front paddock, a difficult job without equipment and experience. That got the place ready to receive rescues in October 2013.

Since then, they've been able to fundraise to cover the cost of building additional fences, so they have three separate areas to house animals. A chicken house stands ready to host rescued hens once another pen is completed. At 20 acres, the land offers room for expansion, though much of it is wooded.

The Pruitts say visitors are typically surprised by how people-friendly the animals are, the pigs in particular.

"Most of the pigs here," Michelle says, "if you start rubbing them, they're going to flop down for a belly rub." She points out that Lucy and Tulip are no different from the ones that end up as ham and bacon. "Most people have no idea, when they sit down to eat, who they're eating. These are actually sentient beings with emotions, likes and dislikes, and families."

But it isn't necessary to meet an Uplands PEAK resident face to face to understand this, she says.

"We have people who follow us on Facebook, and it's changed their life," she notes, referring to footage and photos of the sanctuary's residents. "We don't even have to say anything, just, 'This is Lucy enjoying her life,' and they make that connection."

Vegan limps up to Mark briefly to see if any food will be proffered. Born on an Iowa cattle farm, the black calf caught a back leg in a farm implement, and the broken bones were never treated. "It actually caused his other leg to break down," says Michelle, "because he put all his weight on it."

Now about 11 months old, Vegan spent two months at Purdue before arriving at the sanctuary in February. A few months into his residency here, he's still cautious about human contact, maintaining a slight distance and keeping limpid black eyes on people as they move about the enclosure.

“Sometimes,” Mark says, “bad things are the best things that can happen to pigs or goats or other farm animals.” In the case of Vegan, he says, “the guy’s wife talked him into giving the (calf) away because it really wasn’t worth anything anymore.”

Similarly, Lucy the pig fell off a transport truck as a tiny piglet and managed to survive unharmed. The Pruitts note that such incidents are fairly common; transport truck slats are widely spaced, and piglets a few weeks old weigh only about 20 pounds.

Lucy was picked up by a family, with her “unfortunate” tumble leading to her happily ensconcing at Uplands PEAK. “If the best day in your life is when you fall off a truck ...,” says Mark.

The nonprofit’s work is supported by donations and grants. Public tours are offered once a month. For a more up-close-and-personal experience, people can volunteer any day of the week, and overnight visitors can reserve a bed-and-breakfast room in the couple’s home Thursday through Saturday. Volunteer days are held once a month and limited to 10 people, always including a vegan potluck. Finally, “if you sponsor an animal,” says Michelle, “you can make a private visitation to come see them.”

Regular volunteer Cheyenne DeBlois of Louisville drives 50 minutes twice a week, rain or shine, to help at the sanctuary. To reduce feed costs, she brings food scraps from Whole Foods, as well as spent grains donated by Great Flood Brewing Co. Once here she’ll clean stalls, help with hoof clipping and baths in summer, and do various barn chores. She also represents the organization at various Louisville functions to raise awareness and grow the mailing list.

Most of all, though, she says, “I love being around the animals. I just love being out there and seeing them happy and thriving.”

Vegetarian since age 16, she gradually gave up all animal products after she started volunteering. Going vegan wasn't so much a conscious goal as a natural progression. "I think when you're interacting with those beings every day," she says, "it really seems much less appealing (to eat animal products)."

That message is resonating with people from surprising quarters. Contributions and support come from as far away as England, California and New Jersey. Here in the Midwest, the facility draws volunteers and visitors from Bloomington, Indianapolis and Louisville.

Being smack in the middle of farming country adds a unique element to their work, but the couple says that the response from locals has been overwhelmingly positive. "Regardless of whether they're vegan or not vegan," Michelle says, "they still think it's noble that we're rescuing animals and letting them live out their life."

Mark tells the story of a neighbor across the street who came over to ask, "What do y'all do over there?"

"Here's this big old burly country guy," he recalls, "and he got his wallet out and gave me five dollars, and said, 'This isn't a lot, but I really appreciate what you guys are doing.'... I still get teary thinking about it."

MORE INFO

Visit Uplands PEAK Sanctuary during public tours the fourth Sunday of each month, April through October, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. 4205 W. Grandview Road, Salem, (812) 896-2114, [uplandspeaksanctuary.org](http://www.uplandspeaksanctuary.org)
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