

## **“Therapeutic” Camping: *Le Bel Agneau* Farm and The Montreal Children's Hospital**

*Le Bel Agneau* farm is located in West Bolton in the Eastern Townships approximately one hour from Montreal. It is owned by Marc Belanger and his wife Suzanne Martel. Marc worked originally in the family meat business at the Atwater Market but sustained an injury in 2001 that laid him up for five months. During his convalescence he and Suzanne began to re-evaluate their goals in life, and started to formulate a plan to make their dreams come true. Their idea was to operate a therapeutic farm where people could regenerate their inner selves through appreciating the relationship between nature, animals and humans.

As soon as he was able after his injury, Marc began the intensive study of Zootherapy. Suzanne had been an kindergarten teacher for the past 23 years. She also added to her repertoire yoga, massage therapy, and stress management. Both Marc and Suzanne wanted to have the skills to make their farm truly therapeutic. In December 2001 they bought the *Le Bel Agneau* property, and have since restored the original barn (which dates from the 1800's) and have landscaped the property extensively, including the creation of swimming pond. The home at *Le Bel Agneau* has facilities to entertain groups of people for specialized sessions.

The first animal to join the family was a Bouvier pup named Noisette. Later two horses, some cats and a flock of purebred sheep joined the family. This past October they added to miniature horses to their eclectic menagerie.

Marc and Suzanne wanted to create an environment where, in the country setting, one could learn the skills to become a “Shepherd of one's own life”. They wanted the farm to be available to all people but had a special interest in working with children and teenagers. Enter the Montreal Children's Hospital and a new partnership was born to create a camp for children with Autistic spectrum disorders that was not only therapeutic, but fun too!

The Children's had been running social skills groups for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders for the previous five years. These groups were being run over 12 consecutive weeks, twice per year. Sessions included listening and conversational skills, dealing with bullying and other relevant topics. To date, over 60 teenagers have been through this program. More recently there have been groups with younger children between the ages of 10 to 12 with an emphasis on learning the social skills for life in high school. In the past years parents had often expressed concerns about finding suitable summer activities for their children and thus the group at the Children's (led by the psychiatrists Eric Fombonne and Gilbert Pinard, Jack Strulovitch (Social Worker), and Vicki Tagalakis (Psychologist)) saw a great opportunity to make a difference through partnership with Marc and Suzanne. In July 2006, the Children's embarked on a pilot project *Le Bel Agneau* to create a summer camp for teenagers with Autistic Spectrum problems with zootherapy, social skills building, and plain old good clean fun as its goals.

The first group of participants consisted of six teenagers (three boys and three girls, ranging in ages from fourteen to nineteen). The staff included the two facilitators of the social skills group and a volunteer who worked as a shadow for children with developmental problems in elementary schools. A senior child psychiatrist from the MUHC accompanied the group and was available for consultation if needed. The teens spent an afternoon with their parents

visiting the camp prior to going, in order to get familiar with the setting. The teens also met together one week prior to the camp at the Children's in Montreal in order to facilitate group cohesiveness and to generate excitement.

The week at camp was highly structured. On the first day, each of the participants had to go into the woods and select a staff to use in their new role as shepherds. Each participant was encouraged to personalize his or her own staff by removing its bark and painting it. The following day the group began to learn the art of shepherding. This was a daily activity where each shepherd learned the skills of leadership through working with the sheep. Other activities included yoga, feeding and grooming the animals, and nature walks. Suzanne and Marc have extensive knowledge of the local flora and fauna and the group profited from this. Fishing, swimming, arts and crafts work, and playing various musical instruments rounded out the available diversions for the kids. Built in to the camp activity structure were many opportunities for the kids to interact socially with each other.

While at the camp, the group stayed at a bed and breakfast called *La Maison des Couleurs*. This B&B was reserved exclusively for the group and was located 10 minutes away from the farm. The group returned daily at 5:00 pm, cleaned up, and had some free time prior to dinner. At night activities included bonfires at the farm, movie night, games night and the group also prepared thank you cards for their hosts. The B&B provided all the meals throughout the week and were most accommodating towards providing substitutions and to special requests.

The B&B also had a direct telephone line to Montreal and allowed the group to call home as often as they wished.

At the last day of camp the group gave out their thank you cards and all expressed their sadness in leaving and feeling that the time was too short. In September at the Montreal Children's Hospital the group met for a reunion and everyone involved including the owners of the B&B attended. The group watched a video done at the camp exchanged photos and talked about a possibility of returning. It was a warm and emotional experience.

For all concerned at the reunion—the kids, Marc and Suzanne, the Health Professionals, and the B&B owners—the experience was life changing. The warmth of *Le Bel Agneau* seemed to radiate in the animated expressions on the faces of the kids and staff at the reunion. It was clear that the camp addressed an important and previously unmet need for these kids, who have few options for summer fun that are both safe and therapeutic. Marc, Suzanne and the group from the Children's are working hard to secure funding to repeat the experience next year.