

Mentoring Program

Helps Teens

become **Productive** and

Compassionate *Members*

of Society



*By Carol Rathmann and
Beth Karzes*

History

SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA – Forget Me Not Farm began in 1992 as a program of the Sonoma Humane Society (SHS) providing animal-assisted and horticultural therapeutic activities to “at-risk” children. Mental health professionals, teachers, and therapists bring children to the two-acre Farm adjacent to Sonoma Humane’s state-of-the-art shelter to teach children from violent backgrounds how to value and care for living beings, develop respect for all life forms, and create a compassionate way of behaving and relating to others that is the antithesis of their traumatic experiences.

In 2006 Forget Me Not Farm (FMNF) and the Sonoma Humane education programs merged and incorporated as Forget Me Not Farm Children’s Services (FMNFCS). In the fall of 2008 they became a subordinate organization to the SHS and were granted a separate non-profit status. The rationale for this move was to position all humane education programs for expanded funding opportunities. This strategy proved successful when on September 30, 2009 FMNFCS received a \$500,000 three-year grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) for our Foster Youth Development Mentoring program. FMNFCS is one of only 11 agencies that received this grant and the only one with an animal-assisted therapy component.



The need

The Foster Youth Mentoring Program helps teens aged 14-19 who are approaching adulthood acquire personal, social, and vocational skills that will enable them to become productive and compassionate members of the community. Under the guidance of a carefully-selected mentor and the cooperation of community partners, these teens who are referred to as “transitional youth” explore career opportunities, develop self-confidence



be added. What is magical about this program is that both mentor and mentee share a common interest in animals. With animals as one of the focal points, the human interaction is relaxed and the relationship has time to grow gradually around shared experiences. For some mentees the time spent with the animals brings back fond memories of a pet they may have had at home and is a reminder of a positive relationship.

and leadership abilities, learn to resolve conflicts, form healthy relationships, and accept responsibilities in a safe and secure environment that is developmentally appropriate for each of them.

Additionally, Forget Me Not Farm Children's Services provides a supportive extended family during this critical time in the teen's life, when he or she often lacks traditional family support.

At times FMNFCS staff members are the only "family" attending graduations and other key events in the lives of participating foster youth.

When teens reach 18 they may not be eligible for further financial support and agency services but they are often drastically unprepared for entering the adult work world. An 18th birthday should be a time of joy, the highlight of every teen's life as they embark into the world to follow their dreams and goals. Unfortunately it is nothing of the sort for the 200 – 250 Sonoma County transitional age youth (14 – 19). It is the day their lives change forever – and often a day marred by more trauma. It is the day they lose the roof over their heads and the small bit of security they've come to know as "home". Sadly, it is a day that some children return to abusive homes because they have no place else to go. They are considered adults and therefore are no longer protected by the child welfare system.

Hope and opportunity through animal-assisted therapy

Pets are big business: More than 50% of people in the United States have one or more animals in their homes. Billions of dollars are spent each year on animal food, toys, veterinary care, boarding, grooming, dog parks and day care. More than ever, animals are viewed as member of the family. Once trained in animal welfare, participants in the Foster Youth Mentoring Program are prepared for local, city and state government jobs with animal shelters and other animal welfare agencies. Many entry-level positions at animal care facilities are attainable for youth who may not have strong academic or technology skills, but who have learned to be skilled, consistent and empathetic caretakers for animals.

As we establish new partnerships with local farms, occupational opportunities in the agricultural sector will

How it works

The Foster Youth Mentoring Program serves 40-45 Sonoma County foster youth each year. It supports state and local academic standards and allows youth to experience firsthand the everyday demands of working in the animal welfare fields.

FMNFCS' mentoring is one-on-one and site-specific, with an emphasis on life skills, social skills and entry level job skills. Mentoring takes place daily from 3:00 pm – 6:00 pm at our Humane Education facilities; each mentor and mentee meet weekly. FMNFCS mentoring activities broaden life experiences, and give learning opportunities offered nowhere else, either by the foster care





system or through other community agencies. Mentors provide learning experiences that build the soft skills youth need as they leave foster care and prepare for adulthood. These include navigating public transportation, following instructions and being on time, arranging problems by importance, goal-setting and decision-making, and coping with failure and success.

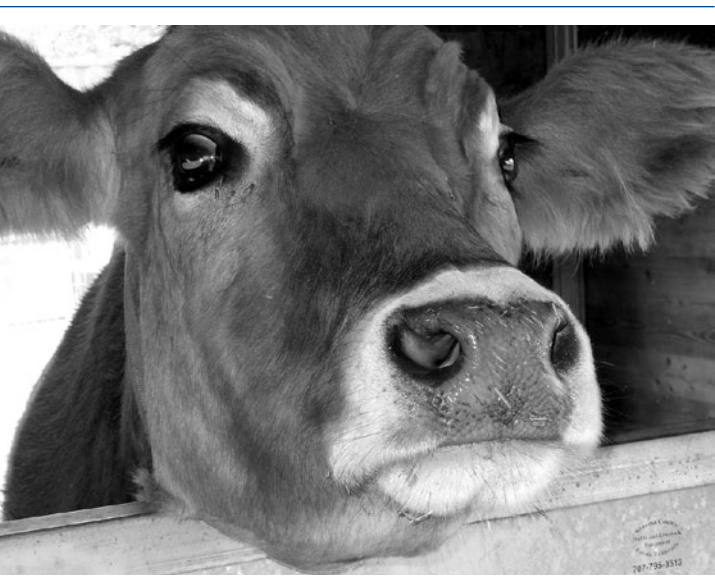
The Foster Youth Mentoring Program curriculum is based on Sonoma Humane Society's existing successful Animal Welfare Apprenticeship Program developed for the general high school population interested in animal welfare. This curriculum is extended and individualized to meet the special needs of foster youth. It includes:

- A six-week training course that exposes mentors and mentees to local and national animal welfare and sustainable agriculture issues.
- A work rotation to sample the duties and skills necessary for employment in the ten departments of the Sonoma Humane Society, including: Veterinary Medicine, Adoptions, Kennel Technicians, Dog Training, Small Mammal Handling, Large Animal Husbandry, Retail Shop, Dog Grooming, Fundraising, Marketing and Public Relations, Non-Profit Administration and Customer Service. Rotations will also include placements in the new Production Garden. The Production Garden, which provides produce for sale to weekly subscribers, will eventually include opportunities to prepare processed foods for sale and staff a farm produce stand.
- A 10-week in-depth clinical work assignment, determined with program staff and mentor input.
- Job shadowing and mentoring with industry-trained professionals, animal shelter staff, and participation in community-supported agriculture activities.

- Presentations by the administrative staff during the six-week training provide a comprehensive overview of how the agency operates, such as administrative and managerial staff position descriptions; including the Development Director, Maintenance and Animal Care Manager, Marketing and Advertising Director, Adoption Counselor, a Staff Veterinarian, and Veterinary Technician.

Inclusion of these presentations during the initial six-week training adds a personal touch and makes the mentees and mentors feel part of the Humane Society's behind-the-scenes family while having a positive ripple effect on staff that doesn't work directly with the mentors and mentees.

The experience at Forget Me Not Farm Children's Services provides joy, fun, laughter, education, and a sense of belonging and normalcy. Youth experience the joy of small successes on each and every visit, and they find security knowing the program staff, mentors, animals, and garden will be there throughout the year.





Mentors and staff provide constant and consistent role modeling for appropriate behavior, stability, nurturing, safety and stability.

Animal-assisted benefits

The teens who participate do so

voluntarily; it is their choice and their commitment. It is not unusual for a mentee in our program to have a history of abuse and/or neglect or to have witnessed domestic or community violence. Many enter the program with low self-esteem, below grade level academic ability, emotional and behavioral issues, and a lack of social skills. Some have cognitive and physical disabilities.

The interaction between non-judgmental animals is an unspoken therapeutic experience that benefits both the mentee and the animal. The mentees often identify with the animals' temporary homelessness, need of a family, history of neglect or abuse, and feeling of abandonment. By caring for the shelter animals the mentees are educated about healthy choices, proper care, safe handling, appropriate touch, and gentle interaction. They learn how to nurture, and gain confidence by working alongside volunteer mentors and professional role models in the animal shelter and veterinary hospital. Participating in this weekly program provides stability and continuity, which are concepts rarely fostered by neglectful parents.

Mentor selection and training

All mentors complete a formal application, including three references that are fully verified by our staff. Staff check their criminal history, including fingerprinting, through the California Department of Justice and any other pertinent crime registry. In addition to the extensive interview process conducted by the Humane Educator, our Executive Director personally interviews each mentor prospect through the lens of her more than 20 years of work with at-risk youth.

Once a mentor prospect passes the recruitment interview, she or he proceeds to pre-match training. We review FMNFCS' history, mission, policies and procedures, particularly confidentiality, unacceptable behavior, and child abuse reporting. During the application, interview, reference check and training sessions, FMNFCS staff members form a good sense of each mentor – information that advises the matching process.

The primary concern is to meet the needs of the youth. Therefore we take each teen's condition and situation into consideration and match them with a mentor who has appropriate characteristics. We consider factors such as gender, racial/ethnic/cultural/language background; shared interests between the mentor and youth; complementary temperament and personality; special needs of the youth; geographic proximity; and similarity between the mentor's career and the career interest of the youth.

To further assess the compatibility of mentee/mentor matches, the mentors are mandated to attend the six-week training with the mentees. These six weeks provide an opportunity for the mentoring coordinator to see the mentor's interaction with the mentees first hand.

Measuring outcomes

To document the impact of the Foster Youth Mentoring Program, particularly for social competence, FMNFCS





now uses surveys from the After-School Initiative's Toolkit for Evaluating Positive Youth Development developed by the Colorado Trust and National Research Center, Inc. The toolkit's questions measure cultural competency, life skills, positive life choice, positive core values and sense of self. We use the Colorado Trust Toolkit question sets and tracking forms for regular self-surveys of youth outcomes.

FMNFCS has built systems for regular client self-reporting and final evaluation six months to one year after leaving the program. Self-reports are used in combination with direct observation from mentors and data collection/in-person interviews with program partners. Mentors and staff members complete written or telephone surveys, including direct observation of youth activities and behaviors, on a quarterly basis. This frequency highlights mentor satisfaction, as well as behavior changes in youth, and helps FMNFCS to make needed adjustments in mentor matching, training or support issues. Data collected is used by FMNFCS consulting psychologist to improve therapeutic learning objectives, make recommendations for program enhancement, establish realistic hypotheses for further research, and provide periodic feedback to our staff and to representatives of active partner agencies.

To manage client information and track program data, FMNFCS has developed a data collection system using a FileMaker Pro database. This system tracks data points required by our funders and provides aggregate and detail-level reporting.



Summary

The Foster Youth Mentoring Program at the Sonoma Humane Society is a uniquely successful program that illustrates how for profit business, local and federal government, and non-profit organizations can work together to provide programs to underserved populations.

In addition to the collaborating agencies, there are more than 75 active volunteers who support the minimal staff of Forget Me Not Farm Children's Services and the 1200 children served each year in its programs. This is a program that can be replicated at many animal shelters. For additional information, contact <http://forgetmenotfarm.org/index.html>.

Authors:

*Executive Director **Carol Rathmann** is the founder and has directed Forget Me Not Farm since its inception in 1992. Ms. Rathmann has more than 30 years of experience in humane education and animal welfare. She holds a Master's Degree in Psychology with studies focused on the effects of abuse, neglect and trauma on early childhood development.*

*Humane Educator **Beth Karzes** designed the Sonoma Humane Society's Animal Welfare Apprentice program, and adapted this curriculum for Forget Me Not Farm Children's Services Foster Youth Mentoring Program where she teaches career skills and animal welfare practices to foster youth. Ms. Karzes is a credentialed elementary education teacher with more than a decade of experience teaching kindergarten through high school age students.*