

# Burlington County Times

## Students get to work down on Chesterfield farm



TCNJ students Zachary Stroik and Danielle Koehler pick strawberries at Fernbrook Farm in Chesterfield on Tuesday, June 14, 2016

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CHESTERFIELD — With a sign in the parking lot welcoming Tuesday's visitors, Fernbrook Farm was ready for the day — and these visitors were ready to get to work.

The visitors had been to the farm before, learning sustainability lessons and experiencing agriculture firsthand as students in The College of New Jersey's Career and Community Services program, which offers 18- to 25-year-olds with disabilities an opportunity to take college courses and prepare for careers and independent living.

The program's five-week summer honors program focuses students on a specific topic. This year, it featured global citizenship, with lessons in community involvement and sustainability as its two main tenets. At Fernbrook, they put those lessons to action.

Fernbrook, a 250-acre farm on Bordentown-Georgetown Road, is a nonprofit organization with the goal of educating young people about sustainability through hands-on activity, according to Brian Kuser, the farm's education and summer camp director. He hopes to make experiences for volunteers, like the Career and Community Services students from the Ewing, Mercer County, college, meaningful and beneficial.

"We don't just want volunteers cleaning the bathrooms," Kuser said.

For four weeks, nine students have helped garden, compost and care for animals, among other tasks. Lauren Madden, a professor for the summer program's course on sustainability, said the students gained an understanding of classroom concepts from working on the farm, giving greater purpose to their work.

Volunteering on the farm and seeing how food is grown and harvested have made Madden's students more conscious of where their food comes from. A salad is no longer just a salad — it is part of her students' understanding of sustainable farming, she said.

Madden said the students were eager to see connections between the real world and concepts from the classroom, making them dedicated volunteers. In this, her first year teaching a CCS course, she is taking a lot away from her students.

"I've learned a tremendous amount," Madden said. "These young people are so committed to making the world a better place."

The group approached farmwork with open minds, said Liz Mikotowicz, a program mentor. The 23-year-old recently graduated from TCNJ with a master's degree in special education, and has been working with students in Career and Community Services for four years.

Mikotowicz said being a CCS mentor, which includes living with students and assisting in classes, has allowed her to apply what she has learned in her coursework while also gaining real-world experience.

For Jenn Sickels, a TCNJ graduate student and CCS mentor, this year marked her first time living with the students. Although students and mentors attend workshops on disabilities together, they also spend time together doing what Sickels and Mikotowicz said are more typical college activities: going bowling, and getting together for game or movie nights.

"It's a ton of fun," the 22-year-old Sickels said. "It's like a nonstop party, almost."

The party includes not just workshops and movies, but also classes and, of course, farmwork.

For student Gabe Slimm, 21, the best part of volunteering on the farm was being out in nature and around animals. Before the students got to work picking strawberries Tuesday, they visited the farm's newest additions: piglets.

As they reflected on their summer course on their last day at Fernbrook, the students spoke of the importance of helping others in their community and protecting the environment.

Andrew Pope, 25, will be a senior at TCNJ in the fall. At Fernbrook, he has enjoyed clearing the trails and making them safer for campers. After graduation, he hopes to start a business that not only deals with computers, but also gives back to people in his community, like veterans or the impoverished.

"It's about more than just helping out. It's about giving them a second chance," Pope said.

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