

Second Front

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Flynn Fields Rescue: farm animal refuge helps people, too

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How does a couple with four dogs and a fenced-in yard end up with a 25-acre farm and a Noah's Ark assortment of farm animals?

"Everything that happened was crazy weird . . . only God had a hand in it," said Christy Flynn, sitting on a bench by the intake area of Flynn Fields Rescue for farm animals.

Now the caregivers for two mini donkeys, five cows, nine pigs, 20 chickens, three rabbits, four ducks, an African tortoise and a "guard" goose, Christy and Mike Flynn described the confluence of events that changed their lives.

After both served in the military, the couple bought a home in Jasper. Christy, a special education teacher, and Mike, a sheriff's deputy, saw a great need to provide loving homes for foster children in Pickens County. They opened their home to foster children for several years, adopting their daughter April when she was a seven-year-old in their care.

During this time, Mike found 11 acres of farmland that had been on the market for almost 10 years. The land was neglected, its pastures overgrown with thorns, weeds and briars, but Christy and Mike were delighted when the owners agreed to let them lease to own.

Loving hearts for children and animals

While working as a detective with the Pickens County Sheriff's Office, Mike often received calls about abandoned, abused and injured farm animals—many from people who owned rental properties in the more rural areas.

"There was nothing in the community to help these farm animals—and we had all this land," said Mike. "We decided there was a real need for a safe place for these abandoned and abused animals." They started by taking in two goats then two potbellied pigs and a donkey.

"We read 'The Gentle Barn' by Ellie Laks," said Christy. "That book inspired us." The book describes a nonprofit sanctuary called The Gentle Barn (www.gentlebarn.org) that rescues animals from severe abuse and neglect that are too old, sick, lame, or scared to be adopted into homes.

"In 2014, as we decided to build our own house on the farmland, Mike was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury and was medically retired from the sheriff's office," Christy explained. Mike had been injured during his 2005 deployment to Iraq and later, while working for the Pickens County Sheriff's Office in 2009, he deployed to Afghanistan with the Georgia National Guard.

The couple lived very frugally on her teacher's income for a year until his VA disability came through, continuing to provide a safe refuge for farm animals in their care.

"Everything happened at once, it seemed, but we decided to go ahead and build our home," said Christy. "Then the whole idea of farm fell into place because Mike wasn't able to work. Quite frankly, the farm saved his life. He loved what he did at the sheriff's office but because of the traumatic brain injury suddenly he had nothing to do."

"We get a lot of calls to rescue abandoned, injured and abused animals. Our goal is to take in these animals, take care of them, rehabilitate and adopt some out to good people," added Mike.

There's a story behind every animal they take in. Christy bottle fed Oreo, a black and white bull rescued as a baby. "He now follows her around like a puppy," said Mike. The bull has a special snorting sound he uses as soon as he spots Christy.

An absent property owner called Mike after her renters moved out and abandoned chickens, a potbellied pig and her babies on the property during hurricane Irma. By the time Mike reached the property all the animals except the mother pig were dead, the had been left without any food or water. The mother pig—now named Buttercup—was hiding under an out-building still trying to protect her dead babies. It took hours



\$600 a month for hay, feed and vet/medical out of their own income. The cost of caring for the animals eats into money to improve the farm but the animals come first.

Community service for troubled teens

"We are fortunate to have established a great relationship with the Pickens County Sheriff's Office," said Mike. There are many juveniles who are required to serve their community service hours at Flynn Fields.

"This really affords us the opportunity to establish relationships and hopefully help these kids overcome the obstacles they're facing. We have had so many children come back to help us even after they've served their hours. We hope we are making lifetime imprints on them."

Kids love working with the animals. They need a place to grow and to be with people who are positive. Especially if the parents are working long hours, Christy added. "When kids are little there are a lot of activities but now with parents working there's not a lot of supervision and kids can get into trouble without understanding the consequences of their actions."

"Flynn Fields is a safe place," adds Mike. "We don't allow convicted felons here." They rarely take adults, preferring to focus on juveniles who need to fulfill community service.

"When the kids first come they are grossed out taking care of animals—it's such a new experience—but in a few hours they are cleaning up after the animals and loving it. Some kids just keep coming back when their community service is over because they have bonded with the farm, the animals—and us."

For kids who have been bullied or abused, the farm is a safe, relaxing place. "I've seen kids come here and work with the animals for hours without saying a word to anyone but there's a smile on their faces all day," he said.

Reaching out to military veterans

As a disabled veteran, Mike's goal is to work with other vets. "The farm is more therapeutic than people can imagine," he said. "I hope vets will reach out to us."

Christy wants to help the wives of vets, too. "Just things like helping them fill out VA forms—dealing with all that paperwork was very difficult and lengthy. It's easier if someone who has gone through the process explains what to expect or how to do it."

Mike and Christy see Flynn Fields as a place vets can get together, enjoy being outdoors and sharing their thoughts and experiences with others who have served.

"We went to a really cool thing with a bunch of his buddies," said Christy. "All they did was relish what they did in the service then laugh about it—and maybe cry a bit. Just talking about their experiences, sharing their joys and sorrows was therapeutic."

Recently, a neighbor called to sell them 15 additional acres adjoining their property. It's beautiful space, mostly level pasture land at the back of the Flynn Fields' property and bordered by a private road. Mike has already fenced in large areas for the animals to roam safely, added some picnic tables, a wooden play set for kids and seeded twice with high hopes for a nice grassy lawn.

This area, with its canopy of shade trees is a tranquil, private place for troubled kids and adults to relax, experience the antics of rescued farm animals and, most of all, feel safe.

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for Mike to sit with her and win her trust before she would leave her piglets and go with him.

Holly, a large brown pig, came to Flynn Fields after a concerned woman called Mike in the middle of the night last December.

"A pig was attacked by a coyote and it's laying in the middle of the road," she told him. At 2 a.m. Mike hitched up the trailer and headed for a remote area along the Pickens/Cherokee county line. He's not sure just how he managed to get the big pig up onto the trailer that night but he brought her back to the farm and nursed her back to health under the guidance of Dr. Chester of Jasper's Animal Medical Clinic.

Sam, an African tortoise, the latest rescue is living the good life at Flynn Fields, in his own private house—the size of a child's play house—with special heat lamps to keep the temperature at 70 degrees inside the house. Once a week Sam needs to be immersed in water. Since it has been so cold outside, Sam gets a ride to the big

bathtub in the Flynn's house for his weekly soak. Come summer, Mike will add a ramp to the tortoise house with a big baby pool for Sam's soaking.

"We aren't a petting zoo but a farm animal rescue. Our animals are all so special to us, so we make our farm a place where they can feel safe and loved. Because we don't always know the background of the animals, we have to keep in mind that some may be shy, territorial or even aggressive," said Mike. "Nonetheless, we work super hard to win their trust. If at all possible, we re-home our animals to places where we know they will be loved. That way we have room for more rescues."

In 2016, the Flynnns established the Flynn Fields Rescue 501 (c)(3). "It was inactive until this year," Mike said, "because we spent all our time and money improving the property—putting in pastures and restoring the land." The couple pays about



How to support Flynn Fields

Flynn Fields is totally supported by Christy and Mike Flynn. Right now, they spend about \$600 a month of their own income to cover food and supplies for the animals. If more animals come in the cost will go up.

Mike and Christy welcome donations and volunteers. Donations can be in the form of goods, gift cards and cash.

"We can use monetary donations or gift cards to places like Tractor Supply. Additionally, we can always use donations of feed such as hog feed, goat feed and cracked corn. Shavings for our chicken coop as well as fescue or orchard hay is always needed.

We are always in need of old comforters and blankets for our piggys to use as bedding. Canned vegetables are needed as supple-

ments to go into the pigs' food. The tortoise and rabbits appreciate any fresh veggies such as carrots and greens.

Additionally, our vet bills can be outrageous, so a donation to Animal Medical Clinic in our name is very helpful," Christy wrote in an email to *Smoke Signals*.

To be a Flynn Fields sponsor, just contact Christy via email to flynnfields@outlook.com and commit to a monthly amount. Sponsors' names are put on the flynnfields.org webpage and mentioned at any events.

Potential donors can access the PayPal link on the Flynn Fields website to make donations or they can simply mail a check to their mailing address: Flynn Fields, PO Box 9 Talking Rock, GA 30175

Volunteer forms and additional information about the rescue are available on the website: flynnfields.org.

