

SHARING THE HARVEST

Chewonki's farm thrives on the shared work of many hands

MEGAN PHILLIPS

I'm often amazed at what we accomplish when we work together. On August 26—day two of Semester 45—all 40 students and much of the faculty of Chewonki Semester School came down to the farm for work program. The tasks we completed in that two-hour block were significant: more than 600 pounds of potatoes were harvested, washed, dried, and packed away to store in the root cellar, and four rows of onions and two rows of dry beans were pulled and set aside to cure. For some of the students, it was the first time they had ever really stopped to consider that potatoes grow underground—let alone that harvesting them is hard work.

Now, five weeks later, these same students seem like old hands on the farm. Today seven of them are digging sweet potatoes. Our new laying hens—bolder than our old girls—are intermingling with the diggers, pecking at the newly harvested potatoes. From time to time, we unearth a burrow of mice: they scurry, we shriek. During shared harvests like these, I have tried to be both fully present with my dirty knees and my current company, and also to honor all that I recall experiencing in my exact location over the past months. Here, I remember plowing this garden with our draft horse, Sal, in late spring; planting spindly sweet potato babies in early June; reuniting with a former student returning to work a few weeks on the farm; and weeding for days with our stellar farm crew under the blazing summer sun.

Loading the farm truck with buckets of sweet potatoes, I head to the wash station, where two students, Ben and Lydia, are dutifully rinsing each tuber. There, standing in the mud that inevitably forms here, these two potato washers have—without encouragement—incorporated a group of sixth graders into their efforts. My heart swells. I came to the farm crew last November after three years on the Outdoor Classroom staff and have worked in these past months to connect those two pieces of Chewonki that I love so much, the OC and the farm. This OC group just completed harvesting all of our leeks, some destined for the root cellar, some for Packout, where the leek is the featured “Vegetable of the Week” for school groups on campus. The farm crew has imagined and offered opportunities for OC students to get dirty on the farm, to do work here that is real and meaningful as a way of connecting to the source of their food and furthermore to this place. And here, unprompted, our semester school students are making that connection happen. Lydia is using her best teacher voice: “It looks like some new help has just arrived. Thanks so much for helping with all the potato washing.” This is a simple thing, this particular form of outreach by Lydia and Ben to some starry-eyed-because-big-kids-are-talking-to-us sixth graders, but a significant thing too—a reaching out through the shared work of hands.

That heart-hands-head connection is further evident—and certainly at its tastiest—when we consider what happens to all

“Words fail me when I consider what our kitchen staff has done all summer and fall, what they do three times a day, every day.”



Megan Phillips (second from right) discusses the harvest with her helpers of the day, a group of Adventure Week day campers.

JOCK MONTGOMERY

the food that moves from the farm to the kitchen. Words fail me when I consider what our kitchen staff has done all summer and fall, what they do three times a day, every day. There is much to celebrate here, beginning with the weekly conversation to establish what produce should be harvested for the kitchen on the upcoming Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Once harvested, that food is made into delicious meals that nourish more than just our bellies. We have turnips hidden so that eight-year-old boys cannot even find them. We have kale stew, roasted potatoes, spinach salad, baked squash, tomato soup, pesto. We have a kitchen crew that pours itself into its work daily, that thinks creatively and flexibly about what and how to cook in order to accommodate what is most fresh and in season. These days, each meal begins with an announcement: “Today from the farm we have.... And from other local farms we have” Some meals end with an ovation for the cooks, usually impromptu, always deserved.

This growing season has been a precious time on the farm, one of fullness and bounty and sheer exhaustion, and there is so much more to come. It is an amazing contrast to last year,

when we were reeling from the combined effects of torrential rains, late blight, and pests. Midsummer, one particularly enterprising young camper looked at our garden cart of vegetables bound for the kitchen and asked why we don’t sell our vegetables off the Neck. “Just think,” he said, “how much more money you would make. You could expand the farm. You could buy tractors.”

My response was a rambling one that touched on the ability of this land and our farm crew to support diverse but limited vegetables and pastured animals, and went on to extol the value of horsepower. But mostly what I had to say was this: we grow food for people we love, for a community of which we are a valued part. And that is a good and a right thing to do. We on the farm are rooted deeply here, and so grateful to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

Thank you for supporting our work. Come visit—there are many more stories to tell. ■

Megan Phillips is a Chewonki farmer/educator and former Outdoor Classroom teacher.