

John Gentilella, center, cares for camels at Green Chimneys with staffers Miyako Kinoshita, left, and Shauna McWilliams.



Force of Nature

A unique farm in upstate New York provides a healing home for animals and kids.

BY NICOLE PAJER

IT'S A TUESDAY AFTERNOON, and John Gentilella, a teenager who has attention deficit disorder (ADD), is taking a camel named Sage on a long walk at Green Chimneys school in Brewster, NY. The 175-acre nonprofit farm provides therapeutic education and life-skills training for kids with special needs and a safe, permanent home for animals, some of which were once mistreated.

Founded in 1947 by Samuel Ross, Ph.D., the K-12 school has expanded from a single building with only 11 students into a nonprofit with more than 500 employees, two campuses, and a \$35 million annual budget. Of its students, 204 live at or commute to its Brewster campus and 40 attend a middle school in Carmel, NY. Thanks to state funding and private donors, all students who go

to Green Chimneys do so for free.

Every day at the farms, the kids feed and care for sheep, goats, birds, and horses, among other creatures, and train shelter dogs. "These tasks help children learn responsibility," says Samuel, who at 88 still lives and works (alongside his wife, Myra) on the school's Brewster campus. "The kids also learn that if they take good care of the animals, the animals will give them unconditional love."

A NEW ENVIRONMENT

The animal-based therapeutic programs are offered as an alternative to traditional schools for students with mood and developmental challenges such as bipolar disorder and autism spectrum disorder. John transferred to the school in 2013 after he was diagnosed with ADD. "[At his old school], I was getting

a call every day that he was hitting himself, pulling his hair, scratching his face," says Maria Gentilella, John's mother. "We needed a different place for him."

At Green Chimneys, John works with camels as part of a therapy program designed by his social worker. The camels were donated to the school in 2012 by a spiritual organization in California. "We started by having John pet and groom them," says Miyako Kinoshita, manager of the farm-education program. Soon, John was able to soothe Sage, a young camel who had become anxious after being separated from her stall mate. "John has anxiety too, and he sometimes gets overwhelmed in the classroom," Miyako says. "But by being the person Sage relies on, John has learned to regulate his emotions and cope with them."



Working with animals is not something every kid gets to do, but it's fun and relaxing," says John Gentilella.

Maria has seen positive changes in her son's decision-making and problem-solving skills. John too has noticed the effects of his bond with the camel. "Sage used to have a lot of temper tantrums where she'd be wide-eyed and kick her legs, so I would have to be patient and wait for her to get it out of her system," he says. "Now I use that patience with schoolwork too. I know that it's going to take a while, but I have to get through it."

Samuel is motivated to continue expanding the school's mission. "It's been great to see the tiny school that I built transform into all that it is today," Samuel says. "Children come here to do better. This is my life's work."