

New York family

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The Journalist,
Deputy Mayor,
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it's my party

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TIPS FOR
NEW DADS



The Art Farm helped Talia, Jonas and Jackie celebrate their birthdays last month
1. Cinderella reading to princesses at Jackie DePaola's third birthday. 2. Pirates Ron Nathaniel (left) and Joseph Petrici at Talia Justin's fifth birthday. 3. Jonas Linnman-Feuring feeding the rabbits on his 6th birthday.



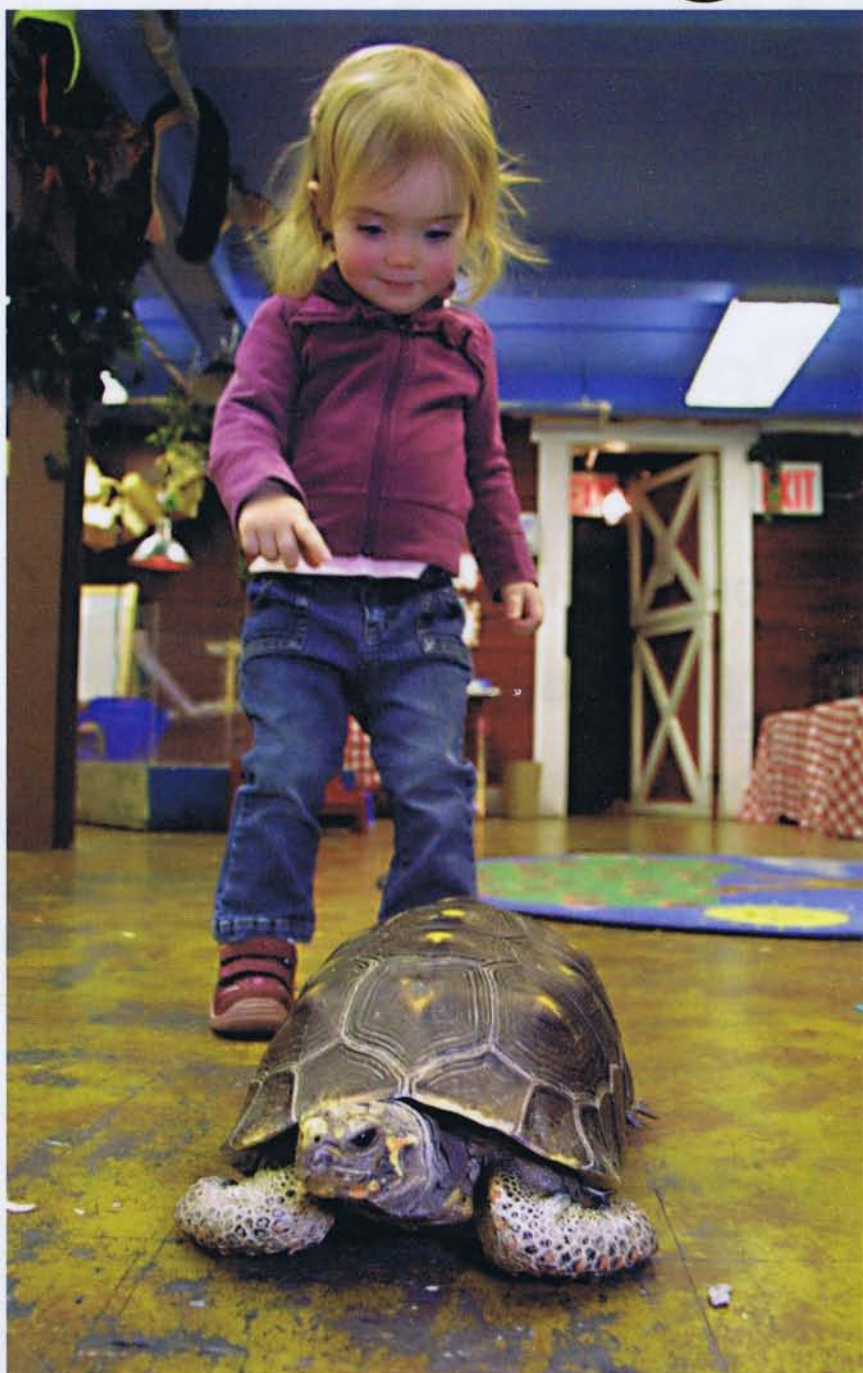
Chris Cuomo with his children Talia and Mari

a special place

Animal Magnetism

BY AHUVA WARBURG

AT ART FARM IN THE CITY, KIDS GET THE FULL COUNTRY EXPERIENCE, BUNNIES AND ALL



The Art Farm offers a bucolic respite to the hustle and flow of the Upper East Side neighborhood that lies just outside its doors. The soft sounds of live animals pepper the soothing country music. The rooms are decorated with painted orchards and farm scenes, and real sunflowers add splashes of color to the space.

In one room, a “Curious Creatures” Mommy & Me class is underway. A guitarist strums softly as Greta, the friendly animal caretaker and educator, gives each 12- to 18-month-old child a chance to interact individually with the animal of the week, currently a turtle. In another room, an enthusiastic instructor helps eager preschoolers fashion an array of shapes, colors, and materials into their own masterpieces. This group has just come from the “barn,” an indoor petting zoo that is The Art Farm’s defining characteristic. Residents of the barn include rabbits, lizards, doves, gerbils, turtles, a tarantula, and a chinchilla, among others, all of which are friendly to children.

This experiment in urban rusticity all started 12 years ago, when Art Farm founder and owner Mari Linnman moved to a farm in the Hamptons that was full of horses, cows, chickens, and sheep. Noting that humans’ inherent connection with animals could be the

ANDREW SCHWARTZ

key to enhancing children's lives, she immediately began mapping out her plans for The Art Farm.

In addition to providing joy, Linnman wanted her project to help alleviate some of the stresses that urban life places on children. Prior to the birth of her son, Linnman noticed the increased presence of competition in children's lives, especially in New York City, where parents are constantly plotting about how to get their child into school X, camp Y, or team Z. But not all children thrive in competitive environments, and Mari wanted to provide an alternative.

"America is very competitive," said Linnman. "There are lots of kids for whom that works fine, but there are other kids out there who are not that confident. All of a sudden, they see a fluffy bunny and stop feeling scared and begin to let Mommy go," she noted.

Linnman knew that having children experience animals at a young age is worthwhile for other reasons as well. As Valentina Van Hise, Art Farm co-founder, explained, "Many kids aren't gentle with animals at first. They're not around them a lot, so they don't understand them. It takes them time to realize an animal is another living thing." Many children also develop animal fears, whether from a parent or another source. Early exposure to all sorts of animals often helps dispel and prevent these and other fears.

After moving out to the country and establishing these goals, Linnman opened a summer camp in the Hamptons—called The Art Farm in the Hamptons—which has since expanded to accommodate approximately 400 children. Eventually, she partnered with Van Hise to create The Art Farm in the City.

Today, the Art Farm has reached the goals laid out by the two women. The relaxed, cheery atmosphere and stimulating activities successfully provide the nurturing environment envisioned by the team. The popular programs at the Art Farm are specifically tailored to meet the participants' age levels and needs, with a combination of animal time, art, music, and baking instruction.

In addition to these classes, a host of cool new programs

"Kids can feed the crickets to the frogs and lizards, and for a little boy of five that's the coolest thing in the world!"

have become available. One interesting after school program is the "Farmer's Helper/Animal Care" program. Kids come to learn about, clean, and care for the animals.

"There's always something going on," said Linnman. "One time a rabbit had a baby in the middle of the class. One day a bunny got hurt when the bunnies were fighting, and it had to go into the ICU. Kids can feed the crickets to the frogs and lizards, and for a little boy of five that's the coolest thing in the world!"

Linnman and Van Hise also have recently introduced the "part-time pet owner" program. Since getting a pet is often unappealing to parents, the Art Farm will let children be part-time pet owners for a year. A child can come in during



Art Farm co-founders Valentina Van Hise and Mari Linnman

the day to feed, snuggle, and play with her pet, but at the end of the day the animal stays at the "barn." Among the animals available for "adoption" are a bunny, a turtle, a chinchilla, a dove, and a guinea pig. In addition, Art Farm offers a weekend morning option where kids can come in and feed the animals. The proceeds from the animal food that the children buy go to animal rescue organizations in the city.

In addition, The Art Farm offers a summer camp where kids can swim at the Y, play soccer in the park, interact with the animals, make their own pizza, learn about nature, and more. "It's like being at camp in the country, even if you're in the city all summer," Van Hise said.

The Art Farm's animal birthday parties are also a hit with kids. Children celebrating with a farm party can play with sheep, goats, chickens, roosters, and lambs brought in from the country for the ultimate farm experience. Other party options include various art, music, baking, magic, and animal themes.

Teaching children to care for themselves and the world around them, including animals, people, and the planet, is also a goal of the center. Kids are taught about animals, nature, recycling, health, and charity. Recently, the Art Farm introduced organic alternatives for baking supplies and snacks, biodegradable balloons, and

its own line of washable, reusable hard plastic plates and utensils for birthday parties. There is even a healthy eating program in the works.

Linnman explains that the plethora of activities and offerings at the Art Farm all aim to give something back, whether to children or the community at large. In addition to placing an emphasis on providing a safe and comfortable environment and age-appropriate activities, Linnman has formed a not-for-profit organization called Mari's Children. For each child that enters preschool at the Art Farm, a child is sent to preschool in Thailand. At the Art Farm, it's all about giving back to nature, to kids, and to the world. ♦