



**Learn and grow.** The Eco-Justice Center (*far left*) educates kids and adults alike about care of the earth.

**Fresh crop.** In the farm's garden, Ann transplants tomato seedlings (*left*) and buries eggplant and bean seeds.

**Alpaca pack.** Ann helps Sister Janet (*below*) walk a group of fleecy friends to an open pasture near a hay field.



# Faith in Farming

A nun whose mission is living in harmony with the land lets contributing editor Ann Kaiser lend a hand and share the joy.

BY ANN KAISER, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM EVANS

It isn't often you find a farm operated by a Dominican nun. Sister Janet Weyker wears work clothes, provides much of the muscle and embodies the spirit of the Eco-Justice Center farm and education center near Racine, Wisconsin.

"Our mission is to teach others about sustainable living, along with conservation and care of the land," she says as we feed alpacas.

"Growing up on a dairy farm is the best preparation I had for this work."

Janet and her crew expect 6,000 visitors for farm tours, classes and special events in the coming months. I've volunteered this spring morning to help with livestock, gardening and beekeeping chores in preparation.

As we lead five fluffy, big-eyed alpacas to a nearby pasture, I

sink my hand into their super-soft fleece. They'll be sheared soon, the fiber used in carding, spinning, weaving, crocheting and felting classes.

With help from volunteers, grants and donations, the Dominican community restored the original farm buildings, some dating back to the 1800s. They also built their education center and a guest cabin, and installed a

wind turbine and solar panels that provide nearly 90 percent of the farm's power needs.

Morning chores continue as Janet and I round up the frisky Pygmy goats and take them out to graze. Favorites with farm visitors, the agile little goats keep busy leaping up on wooden crates and scurrying across a plank bridge to nibble on the grass roof of a small shed near their pen.

In the hen house, I cautiously reach under the Araucana hens in the roosting boxes and am thrilled to find warm pale blue eggs! "You're just like our campers," Janet says, chuckling. "Once the kids get over being scared of the hens, they love gathering eggs."

We feed the chickens, then tear up stale bread to toss near the pond for the guinea hens, ducks and geese that roam freely. When a goose defending its turf threatens to peck me, Janet gently scolds and scoops it up in her arms. She turns it on its back and lets me pet its downy belly. There's no question about who rules the roost!

### Green habits

We stop at the 1912 farmhouse to fetch baskets of laundry. Restored and expanded, the building has a large gathering room for meetings and is home to four sisters—Janet, Mary Ann Weyker, Kathleen Bohn and Rose Marie Dischler—and Kate Kirbie, Janet's assistant.

"When our campers go on scavenger hunts, they're usually stumped when we ask them to find our wind- and solar-powered clothes dryer," Janet says with a smile as we pin damp garments to the old-fashioned clothesline.

Kate helps us load flats of vegetable seedlings, raised in the farm's greenhouse, into a golf cart. We head for the quarter-acre garden, about half planted at this point. They make their own compost and use organic methods.



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**1. Hen house.** Ann collects fresh eggs from Araucana chickens resting in their roosting boxes.

**2. Row by row.** Janet lays straw down between crops in the garden.

**3. Busy bees.** While Janet checks the beehives for eggs, Ann calms their buzzing residents with smoke.

**4. Dirty work.** On a sunny spring day, Ann and the crew at the Eco-Justice Center dig holes to plant new crops in the farm's quarter-acre garden.

We hoe weeds, hill rows, dig holes for tomato plants, place tomato towers and spread straw between the rows to discourage weeds. Then we put in eggplant and bury bean seeds at the base of a trellis. Six community garden plots here are rented to city folks.

Around noon, we break for a lunch of fresh garden salad, veggie stir-fry with rice and strawberry-rhubarb dessert. "We eat fresh and healthy from our garden, and can and freeze fruits and vegetables," Janet says. Any extra produce is donated to a local food pantry.

An Eagle Scout remodeled a pig barn into the farm's honey house; Janet has trimmed it with brightly painted wood flowers and bees. Suited up in long-sleeve shirts, bee hats and gloves, we stoke the smoker and check hives. "We lost a few hives over the winter and have added some new colonies," Janet says.

I puff calming smoke at the riled-up bees as Janet opens the

hives. She pulls out frames to look for brood (the beeswax structure in which the queen lays eggs), indicating a healthy hive. Some hives look good, but for others she plans to phone the local bee inspector for advice.

At the Hermitage, a one-room cabin where I spent the night, I help clean and change sheets.

"It was built 'green' in 2010 with reclaimed materials and has insulation made from recycled blue jeans," Janet says, pointing out a small window in the wall that exposes the material.

Set in the woods, the Hermitage is a peaceful retreat for visitors to rest, reflect, pray or work on a

project. It has a screened porch, a kitchenette and an electric fireplace. Beautiful black walnut flooring came from a tree on the farm that was struck by lightning.

### Education center hub

Attractive flower beds and displays of agricultural antiques around the property testify to Janet's artistic bent. We plant petunias in an old feed mixer near the barn and in a bucket to hang on the old hand pump. Then we put in a full flat in front of the education center.

Although new, the center's style and red paint make it fit right in with the vintage buildings. Classes on fiber arts, organic gardening,

livestock care, beekeeping and environmental topics are offered in a large main-floor classroom. There's a small kitchen, library and gift shop, with more room upstairs for small-group learning.

*Whew!* This workday's been nonstop—Sister Janet's normal speed. I've enjoyed getting to know her and learning about the latest chapter in her life of commitment. "As a young farm girl," she says, "I never imagined that I'd become part of a rural ministry that would bring me full circle!" ■

For more details, including events, volunteer opportunities and Hermitage reservations, go to [racedominicans.org/eco-j.cfm](http://racedominicans.org/eco-j.cfm).



### Ecology Camp at the Farm

At the Eco-Justice Center's popular summer camps, kids learn about animal care, gardening, composting and renewable energy. They explore natural trails, build birdhouses, churn butter and make ice cream and bread.

Tailored for children 6 to 10 and 11 to 14, the weeklong day camps are guided by the Eco-Justice staff, naturalists and volunteers. Older kids sleep over in tents one night, with a bonfire and outdoor cooking. For details, visit [racedominicans.org/eco-jkids.cfm](http://racedominicans.org/eco-jkids.cfm).