

## **Memorable Moments and Friendships Lead Katie Kerner to High Meadows**

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The cat, which Katie and her mother rescued when she was in kindergarten and affectionately named Boo, was Katie's first memory of working with animals. Today, she tends to the barnyard animals at HMS - chickens, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, bunnies, and a mini donkey, but she has fond memories of Boo and her introduction to animal care.

"One day, Mom was late picking me up from school, and I was so upset," she recalled. "When I opened the car door, she had a stray kitten with broken legs. I took on the role of rehabbing Boo, and I loved seeing him thrive and heal. He and I formed a bond, and we kept him as a family pet. Our community knew that all of us loved animals. Over the course of my childhood, many people brought creatures in need of care to our doorstep."

Animals were the subject of all of Katie's books as a young learner, and most of her time was spent in wooded areas near the family home as she searched for various critters needing assistance. When she left for college at nearby Kennesaw State, one might expect that Katie pursued a degree in veterinary studies or animal care. After all, that seems to be the logical choice for the animal-loving Georgia girl. Shockingly, she graduated with a degree in Criminal Justice.

Fresh out of college, Katie acquired a farm in Canton, and in 2015, she married former NBA player Jonathan Kerner. When it came time to enroll their children in school, the pair chose High Meadows. Katie's ties to the school came via her childhood friend who spent elementary school through eighth grade on the 42-acre campus.

After enrolling her daughters, Katie began volunteering at the barn before working the Sunday shift for more than a year. This year, she accepted the role of Barnyard Manager. Katie's favorite moments are the times she spends working with her friend, Laurel Frazer, who is a barnyard assistant and a High Meadows parent.

Stroll through the meadows to the barn, and you'll find Katie conducting classes or caring for the animals. She teaches all students from Pre-K through eighth grade about animal care skills, the empathy and responsibility associated with animal work, and environmental awareness. "I try to make class fun," she stated. "Everyone loves gaining basic science and veterinary knowledge, and we have some older animals that the students are able to do hands-on work with and play an important role in providing care."

There are multiple updates to share from the barn. Little Moon, one of the ponies, has retired, and sadly, a sheep recently passed away. Thankfully, there is happy news as well. Ollie, a horse, recently joined the animals. The students are excited to care for Ollie and help him acclimate to the High Meadows culture. Moreover, Katie is excited for the memories that students will make in the barn.

Her goal is for everyone to have a positive experience, and she lets the students' curiosity guide the lessons. "We have learning objectives," she mentioned, "but we pivot often. I want the lessons to go where their interests take them. I believe that helps keep everyone engaged."

In addition to her regular teaching duties, Katie instructs a small group of Middle Years girls in a homesteading mini-course. The course teaches practical skills that promote a connection with our land and resources and provides an understanding of what it means to be self-sufficient. While mini-courses are something Katie wants to dive further into as she continues her work with High Meadows, she is thankful for the rewarding moments that her job provides.

"I love seeing the students so happy and excited, especially those who are nervous or uninterested in the beginning. They blossom, become inquisitive, take chances, and show bravery. It truly makes my heart happy," she said with a smile. "They're learning, and maybe one day they'll have an animal-based career."

Who could have imagined that a stray cat would spark Katie's lifelong passion for animals, or that a childhood friend's connection to High Meadows would lead Katie's family to become part of this welcoming community? She pours her heart into nurturing not just the animals, but the curiosity and compassion of every student who steps into the barn. It's a legacy of love and learning that will inspire future generations.