

Farm becomes new classroom

By **DARIN LEACH**

AFTER 34 years as an elementary schoolteacher and then principal with the Muscatine Community School District, Carolyn Leach knew it would be hard to walk away from the daily contact she had with students, teachers and staff.

As the decision to retire was nearing back in 2006, Carolyn and her family tossed around ideas on how she could stay connected to the children. "The decision to retire was something I really struggled with making," says Carolyn. "I knew leaving the schools would give me more time to spend with my family and grandchildren, but it was hard to give up the opportunity to interact with the children, parents and my staff."



HELPER: Morgan Leach helps her grandparents get ready for another busy fall season.

Carolyn and her husband, Richard, who also retired from his off-farm job the same week in July 2006, live on a 200-acre farm a couple miles outside of Muscatine in southeast Iowa.

The Leaches decided to try their luck at growing pumpkins, gourds and Indian corn, and inviting local childcare centers and elementary schools to the farm for field trips as a way for Carolyn to continue her love of educating children.

What started out fairly slowly in 2006 has grown to basically a full-time job for Carolyn each September and October.

Last fall 450 children visited the farm. The first field trip was Sept. 30. The last school visit is Oct. 29. Two 90-minute visits a day are usually scheduled for Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The morning class arrives at 9 a.m. and the afternoon session begins at 1 p.m.

Children big fans

While on the farm, children have story time with Carolyn, get a hayrack ride and have organized playtime in the yard, which is decorated with pumpkins, gourds and a small hay maze.

"Carolyn does an outstanding job with the children," says Michelle Cali, a teacher at Learning Tree Preschool in Muscatine, whose facility has been bringing between 60 and 75 children to the farm for the past three years. "Carolyn and Richard are very creative in the ways they help the children experience the fall season. Our children love coming to their farm."

Field trips to the Leach farm are free for students and teachers. "Over the years, the wonderful children, parents, teachers and staff I worked with fulfilled me each and every day," says Carolyn.



STORY TIME: Reading to the children is incorporated into every field trip that Carolyn Leach hosts at her family's farm.

"Organizing free field trips each fall is one way I can give back to a community that has blessed me for so many years."

Pumpkins, gourds and other fall decor are sold at the Leach farm through a family business called Red Barn Pumpkin Farm at www.redbarnpumpkinfarm.com. Proceeds go to education funds for Carolyn and Richard's grandchildren.

Hosting school field trips

The Leaches offer these tips for anyone considering hosting school field trips to their farm:

- Think safety first. As soon as the children arrive go over the rules and expectations of their visit, including the importance of staying with the group and not wandering off.

- Always keep a first-aid kit close by.

- Along with teacher and parent chaperones, it is a good idea to have adult friends or neighbors at the farm as well when children are present. There can never be too many sets of eyes watching

the kids, especially when large school buses are turning around or if children gravitate toward nearby livestock.

If offering hayrack rides, consider totally enclosing the rack with sides and benches. Also, it helps if there is a garage or other permanent structure where children and teachers can go to get out of the wind and rain. Keeping group sizes down to fewer than 20 works best, especially with younger children. Renting a portable bathroom helps keep children from needing to enter your house. Finally, be prepared for all types of weather. October in Iowa can be beautiful one day and rainy, or even snowy, the next.

Leach writes from Des Moines.

Iowa's Farm to School Program

IN 2007, Iowa lawmakers passed special legislation to establish a program to link elementary, secondary, public and non-public schools with Iowa farmers. The Iowa Farm to School Program is coordinated by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, or IDALS, in partnership with the Iowa Department of Education.

Three initiatives have been created as a part of this program to help provide schools with fresh and minimally processed Iowa-grown food.

The Farm to School part is the backbone of this program. Chapter activities include nutritional and educational opportunities for students. There are 11 established chapters in the state, which encompass more than 25,000 students and include activities such as establishing school gardens, food fairs and farm tours.

The other two initiatives are the "A is for Apple" and "Wrap Your Own-Iowa Grown." Both initiatives offer teachers or food-service personnel opportunities to implement smaller-scale Farm to School programs on a one-time basis, as well as offering educational and fun promotional items for the students.

For more information about the Iowa Farm to School Program, contact Tammy Stotts with IDALS at 515-281-7657, or visit www.iowaagriculture.gov and click on "Marketing," and then "Ag Diversification."



AUTUMN GAMES: School children visiting the Leach farm participate in various games and activities.