

LAKE PLACID NEWS

A Shangri-La for kids at North Country School



Ellen and Alexia (Photo — Naj Wikoff)

LAKE PLACID – North Country School/Camp Treetops is a special place, a Shangri-La for kids. The setting is sheer magic in its own little basin at the height of land just beyond Cascade Pass.

When one drives through a gate of trees the landscape opens up to fields filled with gardens ready to plant, a small pond, a rustic castle-like structure at the far end with the forests and rock out-cropped mountains beyond. There are barns with horses and sheep off to the right and a large metallic sculpture of a rooster lording over dozens of chickens dashing about.

As you wind your way up the drive there is bit of a space-age looking building with a tilted round roof as if it's tipping its hat in welcome, and attached to it a metal silo indicating the use of wood pellets for heat. As you round the bend you are struck by the distinct sounds of children laughing and up ahead are a couple waving and pointing where to park.

The occasion for my visit was the school's 10th annual community pancake breakfast, a welcome for locals to come in and learn a bit about what makes this place so truly special. Walter and Leonora Clark founded North Country School in 1938. They believed in diversity in all kinds, social, economic and cultural. They believed kids should spend lots of time outdoors having fun in all kinds of weather, take on farming chores and responsibilities so they would learn where food came from, and have both structured and unstructured time. They believed in healthy fresh food, no processed food, and as little sugar as possible. They valued the arts, creativity and individual self-expression, quality academics, and helping children find the balance between personal choice and responsibility to the community.

All those values remain deeply ingrained and evident. One's visit starts with a pancake breakfast served by the students, but this is not an ordinary breakfast as the eggs and bacon or sausage came from farm animals raised at the school, the maple syrup from sap taken from their forests, and the wheat from a nearby Champlain Valley farm.



Assistant Head Nick Perry with Zina and Yining (Photo — Naj Wikoff)

North Country School is one of the amazing institutions up here that you may have heard about but don't know about," said *Fritz Sabbow*, their new CFO as of six months. *"This place is transformative to so many lives in our community, our greater community all around the Northeast, and internationally as far as Japan and China for some students. It's been a phenomenal experience to see what they provide to children here that makes a big difference in their lives as they grow up. The kids take care of the animals, they collect the eggs, and they make sure the horses are groomed and enjoy riding the horses as well, it's really a great experience."*

"I like the school," said Davy, a student who was helping sell plants. "I like the skiing they have here and taking care of the animals. I like the sheep the best, they are a lot of fun and the job is easy."

"I think North Country School is pretty awesome," said Robby. "I like the structured program of it and the area is pretty amazing. I like the mountains. They are pretty cool. I like the Saturday hiking trips and

canoeing on Round Lake. We have to get up at 6:15 for barn chores. My barn chore right now is the honey wagon, I have to sweep and clean up all the stuff the horses make. My favorite job was taking care of the baby goats, they are pretty cute, but they have since been slaughtered and now we have goat meat.”

“This is my first year but I came to camp last summer,” said Eli. “There was lots of swimming, arts, gardening and farm work. I like the school a lot too. I like the riding program because it teaches kids who never ridden how to ride, and those who have ridden how to get better. My favorite classes are science and history.”

“How come when I talk to your school mates they never say I love my classes, it’s my favorite activity?” I said to Alexia. “They usually talk about their barn activities.”



Joe in the barn with a horse (Photo — Naj Wikoff)

“That’s because the classes are just part of the school,” said Alexia. “They are fun, but not as fun as the activities.”

“Classes are just part of it,” said Ellen. “I love the school. My favorite activity is the drill team.”

One is struck how poised and comfortable the students are talking with adults. They treat us just as another person, but older, that I suspect they feel at times require a bit of patience to talk with. Assistant Head Rick Perry feels the reason the kids are self-confident is because they are on a first name basis with the teachers and staff, and they constantly mix up student work teams on a random basis. Thus kids are constantly communicating with kids of all ages throughout the school, as well as with adults. Economic, cultural or other differences disappear as a sense of being a vital part of a community emerges.

“We are a school that preserves childhood, as you can see by the slides built into the architecture of school,” said Perry. “We believe kids find themselves here and learn to be comfortable with themselves academically, socially, and emotionally. They learn to work through challenges, and we also really try to develop their strengths, with a three students to one adult ratio we can really tune into a child’s needs.”

“We are doing Swiss Family Robinson this year,” said Larry Robjant who teaches 8th Grade Earth Science and stagecraft, stage lighting, and a couple art classes. “This is a kid-driven artwork, we try to set them up so they will have some success. They are working really hard to get things accomplished,” said pointing out a large cliff (based on a tree house, and a two-story ship capable of being transformed into two others during the play one of which has to “sink” during the production. “It takes the eight kids to operate it. The cliff is based on a geological place Scotland that I teach my earth science kids about, so it’s really the connectivity between the arts and sciences, which what I like to do.”



Looking at the chickens at North Country School (Photo — Naj Wikoff)

“I love this school,” said Zina who hales from Ghana. “It’s nice. It’s casual. It’s awesome.”
