



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Angelina and the Magic of Stratford

This is the story of Angelina and Stratford's 5th grade life science program called *Messages from the Earth*. It describes what can be called "the magic of Stratford". Angelina would be in seventh grade, except she has Down syndrome. She participates in fifth grade at her school on a social level, but cannot begin to comprehend the academics her peers readily latch onto in the *Messages from the Earth* program. She came with trepidation to Stratford not only because it was new to her, but because she is terribly afraid of animals. All animals. Even baby animals and small butterflies.

The first day Angelina came to Stratford, she balked at leaving the center. She was adamant about staying inside. She doesn't like being outdoors and she wanted to go home. It was an hour before her mother, Sharon, and I could cajole her into leaving the safety of the building. Fortunately, one of Angelina's classmates had forgotten her water bottle in Sharon's car. We convinced Angelina that Norah was getting thirsty and it was up to Angelina to get water out to her. Bottle in her hand, we started out across the front yard to the Sugar Shack Trail. But, oh, the goats were in their pen; we could not possibly get within 100 feet. I tried taking the long route, walking on the lane and trusting the bushes next to the chicken yard to shield their movements from us. But Angelina knew the chickens were there and would go no further. Finally, with a lot of reassurance, I was able to hold her hand and walk between her and the chickens. We turned the corner to head toward the barn and she was clearly frightened. But the chickens went to the far side of the yard and we passed by safely. She nervously passed the barn with no cats in sight. We made it into the woods, and to my relief, not a chipmunk, bird, or insect came within view.



With many stops and false starts, we trekked all the way out to the cemetery where Angelina proudly handed the water bottle to a grateful Norah. We stayed with her friends in the group for a while but Angelina soon became uneasy and wanted to head back. On the way, Sharon and I stopped to admire the trees. We encouraged Angelina to feel the bark of one. It was the first time she had touched a tree since she was two years old. Sharon and I walked on ahead and after a few minutes I turned around to see Angelina with her hands firmly wrapped around the trunk of a young tree, shaking it. Her mother was amazed. We encouraged her to investigate other trees. She tried to catch the autumn leaves. She was enjoying the outdoors. On the way back we stopped in the greenhouse and she asked if she could water the plants. I gave her a full watering can and off she went to one of the beds. But a small butterfly came in and flew right up to her. Her mother groaned "Oh, no, it's all going to be ruined by a butterfly". The butterfly circled around Angelina. She froze for an instant, took one step back, then tipped up her can and started watering again. Sharon was dumbfounded.



The next day Angelina returned with her class. Once again, she would not go near the barn. "It's scary" was her excuse. But she spent the entire day outside with her group and participated in all the activities as best she could. She even did Magic Spot. Afterwards she climbed a hill in the woods with her friends – another first for her. Stratford had changed her already.

In winter, Angelina hiked out to the sugar shack in the cold, explored the woods with her friends, and threw snowballs. All of these were new for her. But she still did not go near the barn.

In spring, surrounded by her classmates, she picked up the courage to enter the barn. With a great deal of coaxing from adults and encouragement from friends, she allowed herself to get close to a wonderfully adorable kid goat I was holding securely in my arms. More encouragement and she touched the arm of someone who was touching the kid. She called it Karen Goat. And then, very tentatively, and with one fast motion, she touched it. Her friend suggested she do it a second time, then a third. Angelina counted "Four, five, six" and reached out three more quick times. She went all the way up to ten before she remembered her fears and retreated. But later that day she asked if she could pet Karen Goat again. We were ecstatic. By the next day, her fifth day at Stratford, she was wandering around the barn by herself, getting surprisingly close to some of the animals. She never went down the aisle to see the piglets and always froze, petrified, whenever a cat came in view, but now she was actually stroking Karen Goat and she wore a big grin. We left the barn and walked past the chickens. In a huge contrast to her reaction in the fall, she didn't need to hold a hand and she was less than ten feet away from the fence. She flinched when the chickens ran up to the fence, but she never froze.

Five visits to Stratford. That's what it took for Angelina to make some remarkable progress. It's a dramatic example of what happens in the lives of numerous kids that participate in the Messages from the Earth program. Many come with a queasiness of the unfamiliar outdoors. They leave with their heads full of life-science concepts and their hearts swelling with a new appreciation for what they saw and experienced. They touched lichen and stepped in water too deep for their boots; they walked on logs and ate on a bridge; they sat still in the woods and ran thru a pasture. They grew.

Experiencing growth at Stratford is not limited to the kids. Stratford has a way of attracting incredible volunteers and Messages from the Earth is no exception. The guides are thrilled to have incorporated Stratford into their lives. They take great pride in their participation in this program and have recounted many times how their lives have been enriched by it.

Young or old. Volunteer or visitor. It doesn't matter. The magic of Stratford is there every day for everyone.

*Stratford is open to visitors Monday – Friday: 9am-5pm and Saturday: 9am-1pm
Stratford is closed Sundays and Holidays*

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