

Life Lessons for Cowboys and Cowgirls

Reginald and Brenda Stewart, Pembroke, Illinois

To Be Able to Introduce Healthy and Economical Agriculture to a New and Lost Generation

Coodinator: Reginald Stewart

Location: Momence, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$16,830

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Reginald and Brenda Stewart run a farm and a summer camp, complete with horseback riding, to give city kids a taste of country living. A SARE grant made it possible to expand their farm, sell produce at farmer's markets, and start a CSA.



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A camper shuffles into the Run-away Buckers Cowboy/Cowgirl camp with his jeans sagging below his hips. But before the camp's owner, Reginald Stewart, even has to say anything, the camper is on his way to the barn to get a hay string to use as a belt.

The kids at Stewart's camp learn the rules quickly.

"If you don't wear a belt, that means your pants sag. And if your pants sag, that means you're not interested in riding horses today," says Stewart, who runs the camp with his wife Brenda on their 8-acre farm about 17 miles from Kankakee.

In addition to the horses, the summer camp is a working farm; and thanks to a SARE grant, the Stewarts were able to expand the farm, plant new crops, travel to different farmer's markets, and purchase equipment necessary for the markets, such as baskets, tables, and canopies.

The grant also allowed them to implement a "time CSA." Rather than paying a fee, members of the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) invest their time by helping with the planting, picking, and distribution. In return, they share in the harvest.

Stewart grew up in a rough area on the west side of Chicago. But his dad owned farmland in Pembroke, Illinois, and

would take Stewart and his siblings there on the weekends to divert them from the rampant gang activity in his neighborhood. Stewart says he was not crazy about the farming, but he enjoyed the horses and even participated in rodeos with his brother and cousins.

His father's strategy worked. Stewart had no arrest record and did not get drawn into any of the gangs.

Stewart now has a family of his own, and about 10 years ago they left Chicago for Pembroke Township to find some peace and quiet. However, he and his wife noticed that the Kankakee area had limited opportunities for youth. So they decided to start the camp in 2002.

"Kids always look to television and music, which makes the bling-bling and city living look attractive. They overlook the great potential they have right here in their own backyard," says Stewart.

The horses were a natural draw, and the camp started out by offering only horseback riding. Irene Seals, owner of nearby Boots and Saddles Ranch and a longtime friend of Stewart, allowed the Stewarts to use her horses to teach equestrian skills. Once they got the equestrian program on its feet, the camp expanded into farming in 2006.

"The farming allows kids to see that tomatoes don't just come off of store

shelves," Stewart says. "Greens aren't just something that momma throws in a pot."

The camp typically runs from late June to the middle of August, with two sessions offered: a weekday and a weekend session with breakfast and lunch provided. The emphasis is on attracting African-American youth, although the camp does have Caucasian and Hispanic participants as well. The only requirement is that you have a love for horses or farming, he says.

Stewart farms about 5 acres of crops, and all of the kids have a hand in something. However, Stewart can take only the older youth to the farmer's market—mostly eighth-graders and high school students. These kids have to prepare an inventory before they leave for the market and need to know the expected revenue.

In other words, they get a crash course in consumer economics.

But most of all, the campers learn respect and discipline, Stewart says. The first thing campers learn is to respect the animals, which is especially important when dealing with larger animals.

The camp also has a segment called "life lessons," which teaches the kids teamwork, sharing, communication, and responsibility. And it works. Stewart says he has had parents come to him and say their kids have been asking them what chores they can do around the house. They say, "Momma, what do you want us to do? Mr. Stewart always makes us work."

There have been tragic stories, such as one boy who was killed in a drive-by shooting in Chicago. But Stewart has seen a lot of growth in his campers, some of whom have gone on to study engineering and agriculture. One girl, who started attending camp as a freshman in high school, is now studying veterinarian medicine at Elmhurst College.

"Some of these kids have problems, and we learn to deal with it," Stewart says. "But they're not problem kids."

By Jason Peterson