

Hardeeville's Mother Hubbard

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Mill Creek Petting Farm has earned Humane Association's accolades for its treatment of animals.

By Rob Dewiq
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"Call her Mother Hubbard. She doesn't mind."

Debbie Hubbard didn't earn that nickname for her relationship with her children, however, as good as that is. She earned it for how she treats her kids. And her colts, and her bunnies, and her piglets, and her... well, now you're getting the picture. Hubbard runs a petting zoo, the Mill Creek Petting Farm, in Levy. She bought the farm's name and her first few animals from Serge Dixon just over a year ago. Since then, it's become her life. It's a life she loves. The animals have become her babies. Most have known her all their lives, either being born on the farm or bought by Hubbard as newborns. She's bottle-fed many, including one little goat Hubbard found nursing on its dead mother.

Now that goat—she's named it Casper, for its white coat — is a happy, frolicking youngster, less than knee-high and always underfoot as Hubbard goes about the never-ending chores associated with running a petting farm. She cleans the stalls. She feeds the animals. She gives them shots, bathes them, loves them. "I have a gift from God for animals. I always have," Hubbard says as she walks through the animal-filled barn and fenced-in lots behind her Levy Road home. She certainly is gifted, says Barbara Bartoldus, head of the Jasper County Humane Association. Bartoldus visited the farm last week at Hubbard's invitation.

"The Jasper County Humane Association highly recommends (Hubbard's) farm. Not only is she knowledgeable, she is fastidiously clean," Bartoldus said. "This is a tremendous educational opportunity for children."

That's part of the reason Hubbard does what she does. She takes her animals to schools, day cares, festivals and fairs throughout the Low-country, familiarizing children with all kinds of critters. The other reason? Just look around. There's Casper and his twin sisters, Spiderwoman and Buffy, zipping between her legs, bleating and rubbing against her like tall, spindly, horned cats. There's gentle Batman, a miniature donkey who wants nothing more than to be petted and scratched behind his ears. There are the llamas Bozo and Cricket, kissy things prone to drool—in a friendly way — on anyone who happens nearby. Gordy, a happy-go-lucky Vietnamese potbelly pig and father of two litters of squealing piglets elsewhere on the farm, snorts his way between the llamas he shares the large main pen with to be near Hubbard.

Hubbard's favorite is the miniature gray cow standing near the rear of the pen, shyly avoiding her more eager pen-mates. The cow's name is Winnie the Pooh. Her disposition is just as gentle. Hubbard brought the 34-inch-tall Winnie home a year and a half ago, after seeing her at a livestock show. "We looked at each other and it was instant bonding," Hubbard said. "I will never, ever get rid of her. If she likes you, she'll lick you."

Hubbard gets licked a lot. And not just by Winnie. Everything on the farm seemingly shows its affection for Hubbard by licking. Seven full-size horses, including two colts, jostle for position to nuzzle her when she comes by. Ten smaller miniature horses — including a week-old colt, Bartoldus' favorite — do the same, as does Miss Piggy, the waddling, huffing, aptly named mother of one of Gordy's litters of piglets.

The piglets, possibly the cutest critters on the farm, aren't quite used to Hubbard, though. She picked one up last Friday, nuzzling it like she did all the rest to get it used to people. Its squeals could be heard for miles. "Oh, life's so terrible," Hubbard said, grinning as the tiny thing kicked, squirmed and squealed at the top of its lungs. "It's really OK." The little pig didn't stop its yowling until she sat it down on the floor of its pen; it quickly found solace — and Hubbard rediscovered quiet — when it reached the comfort of its siblings huddled in the corner.

"There's a lot of work involved to get the animals used to me," and to people, Hubbard said. "It doesn't just happen. I sit in a stall, a 12-by-12 stall, on a bucket until they come to me. It can take hours." Not every animal is suited for a petting farm, of course. Hubbard finds one she thinks might work, buys it, and tries it out. Most work. Some don't, including overly amorous males that some children might find disturbing. Those are sold to others.

"I try to keep everything at kid level," she said. This time, she's talking about children. Hubbard's farm is open to the public on an appointment basis, although some families still come by to see what's in the main pen on any given day.

One family did just that on Friday, slowing down and finally stopping as they watched the miniature horses and goats run around. Hubbard grinned, walked to their car, and invited them in, much to the delight of 6-year-old Melissa McAlpine of Savannah. Hubbard showed the group the goats, the chickens, the ducks, the pigs. But Melissa's attention kept going back to Shooter, Hubbard's friendly miniature stud horse. "I wish I could pet that horse," Melissa said. Hubbard did her one better. She placed Melissa on Shooter's back — all of two feet off the ground — where the youngster sat happily while her family finished the tour.



