



Fourteen-year-old McCauley Vailes' after-school routine includes feeding the family's herd of cashmere goats.

## Lifelong Lessons

Growing up on a farm gives the Vailes children an education you just can't buy.

BY NANCY DORMAN HICKSON

**D**ressed for church, the Vailes children, McCauley, 14, and Samantha, 12, beaded out the door of their farm in Fishersville, Va. Moments later, their pew plans were abruptly changed to go goat gathering.

The goats were out in a briar patch in the neighbor's field, running amok. To make matters worse, the unauthorized romp ruined the family's grooming of the cashmere goats. The animals were competing at the Virginia State Fair later in the week.

Dad Chuck recalls the matted, burred and dirty runaways the family rounded up. "We spent the rest of the day getting them in show condition again," he says.

It wasn't the most ideal chore for a Sunday morning, but it's just another example of how the farm—and the goats—are building character and accountability. Or as McCauley puts it, growing up on a farm you learn "to take care of things and be responsible for stuff."

Samantha agrees, and can rattle off an after-school farm routine that sounds like a full day's work. Between them, the honor students are involved in competitive soccer, karate, band and Future Farmers of America.

"We feed the donkey, then we feed the goats, then the sheep, and then we make sure everybody has enough hay and water," 12-year-old Samantha recites.

When asked if she has ever forgotten to do her chores, Samantha's appalled. "They'd be really hungry!" she protests. "If you don't do it, they might die."

The children understand that their contributions matter and that work always comes before play. If their friends want to go to the movies or go shopping,


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Samantha Vailes hopes to someday take over the family's Virginia farm.

the girls know what they must do. "When the work needs to be done, it has to be done," Chuck says. "There's no talking about it," he flatly adds. "If it gets done, you go. If it doesn't, you don't."

Yep, that's how it works, agrees McCauley. "If we want something, we have to work for it."

Samantha, who hopes to take over the family farm, often lingers with the animals long after chores are done. "I just like to be around them," she says.

Of course, all that togetherness makes another farm lesson particularly tough.

Each winter the Vailes family evaluates the cashmere and cull the herd. It's a sad chore, Samantha concurs. "Last year one of them was really cute. But it didn't have enough cashmere so it had to go to market."

Her mother, Lisa, notes that the girls "have learned you can't keep them all. You hate to do it, but it is a part of farming."

A more welcome part for the girls is showing the goats. "In the last couple of years, we had a double grand champion," says Chuck. The doe won the top prize at Richmond and Rhinebeck, N.Y. "It was very cool," says Samantha. "We got our picture in the paper and everything."

Her father hopes she and McCauley got something else as well. Namely, he says, the lesson that "over time, if you stay with it, you can achieve your goals." ●

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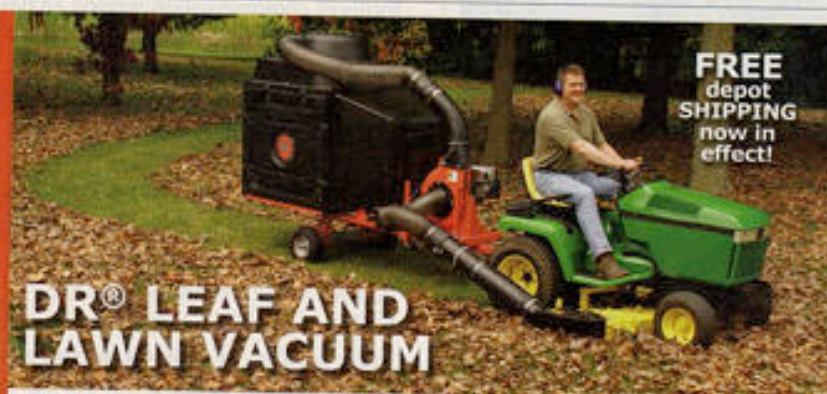
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