

Community News
January, 2018

The Staff of Michaela Farm wishes you a blessed and Happy New Year.

Exactly 10 years ago on the first of this month, Chris Merkel became the new Farm Manager at Michaela Farm. Chris was part of the Maintenance Department for the Sisters for a number of years before moving to the farm full time. During his time in Maintenance, he had come to the farm for occasional work and had some insight into the workings of the farm. He also understood some of the problems that the farm faced over the years and yet was open to taking on the personal challenge of trying to eliminate some of those problems.

One of the issues tackled was bringing up the productivity of the hay fields. The farm needed more hay and a higher quality hay being produced. After hay testing and soil study, he tried several different methods and finally settled on a process that brought the hay fields into producing a higher quality hay and increased the number of bales per acre in those fields. Hay production has increased each year and the cattle are eating better because of it.

Chris also worked extensively on the cattle herd. The herd had some problems to overcome. Because the herd is grass fed, the hay problem had to be addressed first. The cattle were slow coming to market weight but with the quality of hay improved, the time needed to get an animal to market weight was reduced. Calving was sometimes inconsistent and now the herd is producing calves on a consistent basis. In the middle of solving those problems, a genetic issue arose in the herd that caused some cow/calf deaths. After research and with veterinary assistance, the herd is slowly being transition to a purebred Devon herd from a beefalo herd. The Devon breed is a heritage breed which gives the same quality of beef (low fat, low cholesterol, grass fed) as the beefalo without some of the genetic inconsistencies that sometimes come with the beefalo. Herd numbers are up, calving is consistent and the animals' temperament is rather docile. The herd has progressed through the ten years of Chris' tenure.

Chris also brought chickens onto the farm. Our chickens are good eggs laying hens. He rebuilt the chicken house and also built two chicken mobile huts that can be used in the fields. He also has to go get the chickens from the breeder about every 14 months. Those trips always provide good stories about the return trip to the farm with 200 squawking hens in a van.

Chris does so much more than the above. The listing would go on for pages and then I'm sure I would forget something so we will just go in categories. He does the maintenance of the buildings, the outdoor maintenance, the general repair in the machinery, helps in the garden tilling, does the ordering, connects with other farmers in the area, helps groups with some educational programs, and helps to get Michaela Farm's name to the public. In general, he does everything that needs to be done and fills in where ever he is needed. He does it all! Sadly, Chris will be leaving us at the end of this month for a new job. His contributions to the farm will be his legacy to us.

Chris will be missed not only by the farm staff but by all the Sisters. We will miss his willingness to serve, his attitude that nothing is ever too much to do for the Sisters. We will miss his faithfulness to his job and to all of us. We will miss his trust that God will bring everything to its proper conclusion, whether we see it that way or not. We will miss his stories...and he had plenty of them. We will miss the joy that he brought to simple things like hunting for the "perfect" Christmas tree or the road trips for a job away from the Motherhouse or farm...that always included lunch. We will miss his laugh that filled the hallways when he was around and we will miss his personality that is bigger than life.

We wish you great success in your new job, which we know will be happening. We can only offer you in return our prayers and heartfelt gratitude for your many years of service to the Sisters of St. Francis. Come back and see us, let us know how you are doing. You will always be part of this Franciscan family.