



FAMILY

Beautiful Together: 83 acres of Chapel Hill farmland a safe haven for pets, children

Eighty-three acres of open fields in rural Chapel Hill is currently being transformed into a one-of-a-kind healing space and sanctuary for animals and youth.



By **Jessica Patrick**, WRAL senior multiplatform producer

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Eighty-three acres of open farmland in rural Chapel Hill is being transformed into a one-of-a-kind healing space and sanctuary for animals and youth.

Chapel Hill entrepreneurs Tamara and Steve Lackey, founders of **Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary** and owners of Coco Bistro & Bar, a sustainable coffee shop and restaurant, had hoped for a 10-acre site to build their biggest dream yet. They ended up with 83 acres.

Located 15 minutes from downtown, Beautiful Together will be ready to welcome its first animals this fall. Tamara Lackey, along with dozens of staffers and volunteers, has big plans for the site, which will include a full-service veterinary clinic and surgical center, fields of open space for rescued dogs and cats, a horse ranch, hiking trails, training centers and workshops for youth.

The nonprofit Beautiful Together was founded in 2014. At that time, the Lackeys worked primarily in Africa, renovating orphanages and supporting children waiting for adoptive families. They also organized projects in the United States, helping children aging out of foster care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone was struggling, including overburdened animal shelters, the Lackeys expanded their mission.



"As a family we've always adopted rescue animals and fostered a lot of animals ... at one point in 2020 we had 34 cats, kittens, dogs and puppies in our house," said Lackey, who instantly noticed a special bond between her teenagers and the animals they were fostering.

"I could really see the connection between these animals who need love and refuge and my children, who were studying from home, in Zoom, in their pajamas ... I watched that whole experience, these really sweet moments [with animals] light them up," she said.

Lackey, who has traveled to more than 30 countries and six continents, recalls seeing young boys in Ethiopia cuddling with stray dogs in the street. "They slept at night all huddled up on the streets with all these dogs and puppies curled up around them," she said. "It was this clear demonstration of mutual comfort."



Beautiful Together expanded to become an animal rescue in 2021 with the help of donations and foster families.

Soon after, the couple secured the Chapel Hill site, the future home of the

rescue. In the months to come, the farmland will become a space where rescued and foster animals can recover and heal, spending time with children in at-risk situations from underserved communities, before finding forever homes.

In two years, Beautiful Together has pulled 2,000 animals out of rural shelters. Lackey and her team depend on a network of foster families to take care of the dogs and cats until they can be adopted, but in the coming years hundreds of animals will be able to heal on-site at the Chapel Hill sanctuary before finding their forever homes.

Although the site is still under construction, Beautiful Together has already hosted weeks-long outdoor programs for youth led by Leslie Davis, director of youth programs and wife of UNC basketball Coach Hubert Davis.

The nature-based programs focus on literacy and the curative connection between people and pets. Kids will build bird feeders, go for hikes and learn to care for animals, among other projects.



"It was just so awesome to see them out here in this beautiful land, so

happy and so confident," said Dr. Eve Boggs, one of Beautiful Together's full-time rescue veterinarians, who will lead some on-site youth programs. "It was just magical."

Beautiful Together has grown into a network of hundreds of volunteers and more than 25 staff members, including two rescue directors for dogs and cats and entire teams of people who pull animals from inhumane situations or crowded shelters.

Boggs and co-veterinarian Dr. Kiley Daube recently transitioned from Beautiful Together volunteers to full-time staff members who will work on-site in Chapel Hill caring for animals rescued from shelters or homes with neglectful conditions. After years of helping at spay and neuter clinics and animal shelters, Daube said the transition to rescue medicine came naturally.



"I felt like I needed something else besides private practice, a way to give back to these animals," Daube said.

North Carolina animal shelters had the second highest kill rates in the country in 2021, which the three women know all too well. Lackey said on many instances they have pulled dogs out of the shelters the same day they were scheduled to be euthanized due to behavioral problems, medical conditions or just a lack of available space, since county shelters have to accept all surrendered animals.

"We've had some really incredible wins and some really devastating losses," Lackey said.

Shelters can be stress-inducing for animals, and many have behavioral or health problems that need to be addressed before they are adopted. That's why Beautiful Together will serve as a sanctuary for dogs and cats to heal and de-stress before finding homes.

"Our goal here is to bring animals in, give them a safe place to decompress, do behavioral evaluations and give them amazing medical care, and then have them go to foster homes," Lackey said. "It's very traumatic in shelters for animals, so giving them a chance to get exercise and good nutrition ... we believe this will make the foster relationship much more impactful, so that by the time that animal is adopted it's in such a better place."



The animals won't stay at the sanctuary forever but will thrive there until they find foster families and, eventually, permanent, loving homes.

"It will be a village," added Lackey, who wants the site to help 1,000 animals each year. "We don't want to keep them here, we very much want them to get into homes. This is kind of a way station where we can give them the comprehensive help they need."

There will even be an on-site birthing center for pregnant dogs and cats -- another effort to relieve crowded shelters.

"We don't want to be a shelter," Boggs added. "We want to support the shelters and get animals out of the shelters and into less stressful situations ... because the longer they stay in those shelters in those stressful situations, the less likely they are to be adopted."

Even though shelters do the best they can with the resources they have, there is limited space -- and time -- for animals. Often dogs and cats with medical or behavioral issues don't get a chance to recover and thrive.

"It can take a full six months for their full personality to shine through," Daube said. "You're not going to know their real personality until they really feel comfortable ... until they get good nutrition and they're being loved ... it takes a long time."

Cat lovers will love the sanctuary's community cat village, an outdoor space where feral and antisocial cats that wouldn't have been adopted otherwise can live and roam free from predators. According to the SPCA, close to all feral cats that end up in shelters are euthanized.

Whether it's witnessing animal abuse or seeing how many animals are euthanized because they don't have a chance to find loving families, working with animals is heartbreaking. Boggs said there is a high rate of depression and suicide in veterinary medicine, something many people don't realize.

"When you first become a veterinarian, you think it's going to be this one thing, and then you quickly find out it's not all the things you thought it was

going to be," said Boggs. "[Working here] has given me an opportunity to really sort of get back to what veterinary medicine is -- helping animals -- and an opportunity to be excited about being a veterinarian again."

Beautiful Together works regularly with animal shelters in 30 North Carolina counties with a focus on helping those in rural areas.

Lackey said they gets texts and calls constantly from shelters that need a place for animals, like the Stokes County Animal Shelter in Germantown, N.C.

"They really are under-resourced, and they are doing their very best in a county with a lot of surrenders and a lot of strays," she said. "The shelters are doing the best they can," Boggs added. "We want to work with shelters so people can really understand that nobody goes into shelter work because they want to kill animals. They're wonderful people who are in really hard situations and trying to do the best they can for animals."

To keep animals out of shelters, Beautiful Together will also host educational programs on site, including pet surrender prevention and animal welfare advocacy.

"Most people don't know that if you surrender a pet [at a shelter] they could be euthanized," Lackey said. "There are people who change their mind and it's too late and it's devastating."

As part of its mission, Beautiful Together will offer low-cost and free veterinary care, a pantry of food and other free pet supplies and counseling services for people and pets in crisis.

The land will also be open to the public for events or for families to walk the grounds and see the animals.

"This is going to be a place people will want to come and be just because it's beautiful," Boggs said. "Just the energy that's going to be here ... it's a place where people want to be."

How to support Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary

The site will welcome its first rescue animals this fall as it continues expanding. Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary has a 10-year fundraising goal of \$8,450,000 to build its welcome center, veterinary clinic, pavilions, buildings and activity areas. Sponsorships are available along with fundraising opportunities.

People can donate money or sign up to volunteer, foster or adopt on the **Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary website**.