

Magoon Farms – growing tomorrows leaders today

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In an age when Americans have taken a step back to re-examine their values, one couple in the small com-



According to Candice, the chickens sing a little song when they're laying eggs. (Photos by Gary Barton)

munity of Coble, Tenn., found a refreshing way to instill strong character and values in their children.

Lt. Col. Bruce Magoon, chief of the Propulsion Test Division at AEDC in Southern Middle Tennessee, calls himself the richest man in the world because of his family and the times they share. With quality family time, hard work and responsibilities, he and his wife, Diane, are teaching by example as they manage their 3,000-acre farm in the rolling hills of Hickman County.

The colonel grew up on a small dairy farm near Erie, Penn., where everyone had a job to do and he re-

he developed in the Air Force, building a solid foundation on which to raise his young family. He and Diane, a flight attendant until September 12, 2001, decided a farm-based upbringing with shared responsibilities was the best way to do that.

With 17 cats, two dogs, three registered quarter horses, and six ducks and acres of grain and produce, the farm hums with activity. And, as in Colonel Magoon's childhood, everyone has a job, even the family dog, Jessica.

"Jessica watches over the cats," said nine-year old Katy.

On a Saturday morning when most kids would be watching cartoons the Magoon clan was already out doing chores. They don't watch television.

"It really came about as an accident," Colonel Magoon laughingly explained. "After moving from one of my Air Force assignments, we just forgot to reconnect the TV. We were so busy during the day, and the time we spend together is so precious, we didn't miss it for about six months. Then, we just decided we didn't need it anyway."

Fifteen-year-old Curtis, thirteen-year-old Candice, and eleven-year-old Chris met us at the chicken coop where they were cleaning house for their 150 chickens. Seven-year-old



Colonel Magoon stands in his strawberry patch and explains the importance of ensuring proper crown depth to produce healthy berries. Their land also supports 75 head of Angus beef cattle.

berry patch. In mid September, using a special water wheel planter, Diane and the kids planted 11,000 strawberry plants of three varieties. Diane also uses the planter for harvesting the berries, sorting as she picks. With an expected yield of 10,000 quarts of berries, it saves a lot of time and back strain, she said.

Although the strawberry plants come from a nursery, the 12,000 watermelons, cantaloupe and tomato plants grown in the greenhouse are another family project. Planting seedlings in shifts of 4,000 plants, Diane sets up a family assembly line.

"After I lay out the trays, a couple of the kids fill them with dirt, one of the younger ones comes through and pokes a hole for the seed and another drops the seed in place," she explained. "Afterwards, I do a quality check and cover them."

Despite the family's hard team efforts, they still rely on Mother Nature to ensure success.

"Watermelons and cantaloupes won't produce fruit unless they are pollinated by honeybees," Colonel Magoon explained. "So we started raising bees to help with the melons. Diane also oversees the honey production."

From the greenhouse it was to the field the chilly, pre-winter morning, we walked across the remnants of last year's cornfield. Shaped like the state of Tennessee, the maze had 10 stations each containing three questions based on agriculture, the Bible or Tennessee history. A correct answer at a station revealed the next path. The Magoons used the maze to share their land and knowledge with the community treating local youth groups to hayrides and bon-

fires after they completed the puzzle. At the center of the maze, an arched wooden bridge provided a view of the rolling fields and river below.

Just beyond the cornfield, old meets new as an 1818-era log cabin undergoes refurbishment. According to local history, the house was built

to take advantage of their early retirement program."

Now they're all together every morning and everyone helps get the day started.

"We get up at a quarter til six and start the day with a full breakfast—eggs, meat, and sometimes French



Diane, Kay and Colonel Magoon explain the intricacies of bee keeping. Bees are essential to pollinating the melon crops.

alizes just how much of an impact that had on his life.

"It took all of us everyday to get the work done," he said. "I had chores before and after school. The hard work and responsibility that were a part of my upbringing are what have made my Air Force career so successful. Responsibility and character don't come about with a magic dust you just sprinkle over your children. It's something you have to build, and we want to help our children build that kind of character. It's the legacy I want to leave them."

The values learned during childhood meshed perfectly with those

Zack eagerly showed us where the eggs were as Candice introduced us to her feathered friends.

"When the hens are laying or have just finished laying, they sing a little song," she explained. "We have Rhode Island Reds and Black Bardrocks, and they usually lay about seven dozen eggs a day. We started out with 25 each as a 4-H project. When they were grown, we had to choose the six best to be judged at the county fair. We won first and second place."

But the chickens are only a small part of the enormous farm. Across the road from the chicken coop lies the newly planted two-acre straw-



Candice, (left) and Christ (center) raise 150 of the families' chickens as part of their 4-H project. The family shares the job of cleaning the coop on Saturdays.

by some of the first white settlers allowed across the Duck River. Between its hand-hewn logs, the Magoons found newspapers dating from the years of Teddy Roosevelt's presidency.

About 100 yards away, shiny, modern grain bins with advanced drying systems house 100,000 bushels of field corn. Each year the farm yields 150,000 bushels of corn, 30,000 bushels of wheat and 30,000 bushels of soybeans in addition to three types of tomatoes, strawberries, watermelon and cantaloupes, and other garden produce.

As with most Americans, the events of September 11 had a profound impact of this close-knit family, especially on the children.

"That day had a huge impact on the kids," Diane said. "Several of the flight attendants killed that day and one of the pilots of the plane that hit the World Trade Center were close friends of our family. After that day, the children were so afraid for me to fly that they asked me not to fly again. I couldn't bear to see them so worried and frightened, so I decided

toast," Diane said. "Then we make our assembly line to make school lunches and do our chores. Every morning Curtis makes seven sandwiches, including one for me since I substitute teach at the school. Then, someone else packs snacks and juice. Zack empties the dishwasher. Emily gets the breakfast dishes out; Katy feeds the pets and the kids take turns gathering and cleaning the eggs. By 7 a.m., we're out the door."

Sounds like a lot of hard work, and it is. But, just a few hours spent with this family makes one envious of the love and closeness they share. They spend their spare time using their imaginations to create Leggo towns, learning to play musical instruments, drawing, writing poems, riding horses, and just being kids—the old-fashioned way instead of the electronic way. Instead of memories of Nintendo games and TV shows, they will remember the special bond built by working side-by-side.

Colonel Magoon summarized it best, "We're not growing crops, we're growing tomorrow's future leaders."



About 100 yards from the high-tech grain bins on the farm is a 185-year-old cabin (inset) built by some of the first white settlers to cross the Duck River. Restoration is another family project.