

# The Friends of Autistic People

## White Paper: Farm Living and Learning Academy for Young People with Classic Autism

Land Requirements Document

*“It is a surprising fact that many - though by no means all - autistic children are exceptionally good-looking. Of course, every mother believes her children to be the most beautiful on Earth, but anyone who knows my sons would agree: George and Sam are extremely physically attractive.*

*Hans Asperger, who published a pioneering account of autism in 1944, remarked on the ethereal beauty of his patients almost as if it were a diagnostic symptom. No one, so far as I know, has yet advanced a hypothesis to explain this.*

***Is it the absence of the more disfiguring human emotions - guile, malice, greed - that keeps the autistic face characteristically beatific? The eyes are large and bright, the smile undirected and serene. The autistic often gives the impression either of concentrating on an inner world, or of looking through and beyond us to something out of reach.”***

*- Charlotte Moore - Guardian*

## Introduction:

It's so hard to describe autism to someone not directly involved with the autism community. The needs of everyone with autism are different from the needs of any other person, whether the other individual is neurotypical or cognitively disabled, or even from another individual with autism. Still, people who have autism have the following in common with everyone else: the right to be safe, the ability to grow and the freedom to pursue happiness.

What differentiates the autism community from other groups of special needs people is what has been described as “mind blindness”, or the inability to understand the mental states of others. This means that a person with classic autism usually can't read another person's facial expressions or body language and does not know if he/she is happy, angry, tired, hungry, or is in any other state of mind. Many people with classic autism do not understand the simple concept that you or I have a view of the world that is independent from them.

All individuals with autism have in common the Social Communications Disorder. It is like a degree of blindness. As some legally blind people can see shadows and some color but no detail, most individuals with autism know when someone is happy or angry but have no concept as to why the person is in either state.

This causes an individual to not understand how to function in a normal community setting. He or she cannot understand why cars don't just stop to let them across the road or that they cannot get undressed and try on clothes in the middle of a store. The concept of money can be taught, but why we really need it to purchase food in a store is beyond many individuals with autism.

All in all, it has been very difficult, if not impossible to integrate people with classic autism into standard communities with group homes and independent living.

Our goal, then, is to provide an appropriate community setting for individuals with classic autism, the setting that has provided them with food, clothing, shelter and a sense of community for thousands of years: a FARM. In addition, these supports people with autism should receive autism therapies and a continuing education throughout their lives that teaches them meaningful skills that allow them to exercise self determination and lead to employment, whenever possible.

The purpose of this document is to describe the farm community that Friends of Autistic People (FAP) desires to build. We desire to purchase or lease sufficient land to build the community we are describing.

## **Overview:**

To this end, to support a community of grown children/young adults with classic autism who wish to learn farming and live in a relaxed rural environment, Friends of Autistic People (FAP) believes that the appropriate setting is best described as a "Farm Academy". This belief is shared by more and more professionals and based on the experience of several successful farms here in America and in Europe where they are more common. This is not a new idea; the first farm model for adults with Autism was established at Somerset Court in England in 1974. Since then, many farm communities have been established worldwide. Bittersweet Farms is the first of its kind in the USA. Established in Ohio, more than twenty years ago, Bittersweet is still a flourishing community.

FAP does not envision a typical, modern working farm where every nickel of profit is squeezed out of the crops. Instead, we plan that the FAP Farm Academy village will provide its residents with an agrarian and rural environment more typical of times when 50 out of every 100 people in America worked on a farm. We intend to provide the "Student Farmers" the experience of growing vegetables and flowers, raising animals,

working with their hands, creating craft products and serving the community. This will be a rewarding life for the Student Farmers and useful for the community they live in.

To this end, FAP intends to sponsor the creation of a Farm Living and Learning Academy village which will provide homes for, and will specialize in educating the grown children/young adults with classic autism in organic farming, horticulture and animal therapy, as well as other life skills, and where, to the extent of their abilities, they will exercise a life of self determination. In the end, FAP desires to build a farm that resembles Sturbridge Village. Small shops and lots of handwork will provide the residents with a sense of self worth and community.

FAP is working closely with the Department of Developmental Services (formerly DMR) to provide its clients with quality choices in the most cost-effective manner. The Farm Academy will provide an important component for individuals with classic autism. It will be a place for them to live and make choices regarding the work they do and activities and programs they participate in. In other words, they will live a life of self-determination. Because of their limited ability to live independently in the general community, the FAP Farm Living and Learning Academy village will provide individuals with classic autism with a separate community that is understanding and safe yet embedded in the community at large.

The educational function the Academy provides is to teach our resident farmers to live more and more independently. A successful farmer will go from highly structured work and housing that require one-on-one supervision to work and housing that require less support, in a safe and supportive environment. Where it would be a risk-taking exercise to try an individual's abilities with less supervision elsewhere, the true value in a properly set up Academy will be in its design to safely teach and evaluate this improvement in an individual's skills.

Successful deployment of a Farm Academy for individuals with classic autism will eventually be measured by its ability to improve on the residents' quality of life and the ability to support them more cost effectively.

## **Requirements:**

FAP believes that this can be accomplished best within a farm community, which, when it is eventually in full operation, will provide services to 20 resident student farmers and 20-30-day program student farmers. To provide this level of service, FAP believes that approximately 50-60 staff professionals will be employed.

To support this community, FAP will require enough zoning approved land to support the following buildings:

1) Four residential homes that have the outward appearance of single family houses that would be welcome on any street in Connecticut. Each home will house 5 Student Farmers. The homes will contain a combination of bedrooms and apartments that will allow the resident farmers to improve on their ability to live independently without changing houses. They will contain a central kitchen in addition to small kitchenettes in the apartments. The homes will require an office area for the professional staff in addition to a medication closet that can be locked and monitored. In addition, there will be congregate areas for the resident Student Farmers to live and interact much like a normal family. The house will require parking for 4 staffs and 4 visitors concurrently. A garage will be required for the home's vehicles that may be vans, SUVs or station wagons. This should be a two-car garage with an extra high entry to accept modified vans that can carry wheelchair bound individuals.

2) An instructional/administrative building(s) large enough to support a working and learning community of all residents and day student farmers plus all the support staff at one time. This building should contain:

- a) Administrative offices.
- b) Classrooms.
- c) Recreation areas (a small gymnasium for indoor games).
- d) A large kitchen.
- e) A large meeting room with raised stage area.
- f) A loom based weaving business (very common in autism communities).
- g) A wood working shop.
- h) Other craft areas that can provide meaningful work.
- i) Appropriate parking for 30 to 40 cars

3) A greenhouse complex large enough to support the learning and work efforts of 20 individuals plus 10 support staff.

- a) These will be used for seedling and cash crops.
- b) They will be used for training student farmers and residents in vocational skills
- c) Appropriate parking

4) A barn large enough to support the learning and work efforts of 20 individuals plus 10 support staff.

a) Room for many unique animals

b) Stables to board horses

c) Open air enclosure to roam for these animals

5) Farm stand/shop from which the “student farmers” sell farm and craft products they produce.

6) An outdoor pool with a proper level of supervision. This would be a wading pool, no more than 3-4 feet deep for summer use.

Based on these requirements, FAP desires to work with local zoning officials to determine land requirements to build a “private school” as described above. We desire to build a relationship with the original farmer where he or she may want to continue to farm as much of the original farm as possible, share resources where feasible and work together toward our mutual benefit.

*Additionally, the Farm, by definition, will save open space and thus will support the State of Connecticut’s program to preserve farms, land and open space.*

FAP is interested in obtaining the following options, which will allow us to pursue the building of this Academy:

1. A direct purchase of the land required, splitting the property, with deed restrictions applied to both the purchased and the remaining land requiring both the Academy and the owner to maintain the land as a farm.

2. A 99-year lease, which will allow the Academy to build on the existing land as part of a deed restricted farm. This is intended to exercise a non-development option for the farm in total.

3. A direct purchase of the entire farm, with a deed restriction allowing the original farm family to continue to live and work the farm in perpetuity. This would be limited to the original family or its descendants. If no descendants wish to farm the remaining property, this right would expire.

For options 1 and 2, we would require first rights of refusal for any sales of the land to another party.

FAP would consider other arrangements that the landowner may wish to offer. Creativity is of essence with the understanding that FAP would require control over the land which the Academy will occupy, but desires to assure that as great portion of the original farm will remain a farm as possible.

Legal notice:

While the above "Land Requirements Document" describes FAP's desire to acquire land to build a private school for adults with autism, it also serves as a White Paper to inform and describe FAP's intent to create a Farm Academy. This Document in no way binds FAP or any other person or entity in contract tort or otherwise to any sale or purchase or obligation of any type. The purpose of this document is to begin the process of getting information and start negotiations for acquiring land that would be used for the described school. In that so many issues regarding the design, building and operation of such a school are unknown until further study and review by appropriate parties. The above requirements are subject to change.