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Photo credit: Courtesy of Andrus | Students work with animals at Andrus in Yonkers.

A return to its farming roots is providing the Andrus center with its latest steps forward in treating the emotionally fragile children who live or attend school at the nonprofit agency's Yonkers campus.

Eighty-five years after its founding, Andrus is using basic farm skills to not only reinforce science lessons taught in the classroom but to illustrate life lessons introduced in therapy. Originally founded as an orphanage by John Emory Andrus in memory of his wife, Julia Bourne Dyckman, the 106-acre campus on North Broadway had been a working farm and today is once again home to chickens and sheep, while carrots, peas and other produce sprout from its [earth](#).

"It's really healthy for anyone to spend some time planting and weeding and seeing something grow," said Bryan Murphy, vice president for campus programs and operations. "It takes some of the institutional approach away."

The 155 children who attend school and receive treatment at the Andrus campus come from a variety of situations. They are between the ages of 5 and 14, and all suffer from emotional problems, whether the result of a mental condition or a situation such as a chaotic home life or neglect. Seventy-three of the students live at Andrus, while the rest attend as day students at campus' Orchard School.

The alternative farming programs, introduced about two years ago, are meant to reach the children at a level traditional therapies don't.

"It's got to teach them a tremendous amount about life, how something can start from a seed, how it can grow if we take care of it and how it can supply us with nutrition for the future," Murphy said. "That's one of the greatest things we can teach these children."

In the campus' two renovated greenhouses, where most of the gardening takes place, children start flowers, vegetables and cooking herbs from seed. After caring for the plants, they harvest them. The parsley, potatoes, rosemary, thyme and other produce are eaten by the students in their group cottages or contributed to the community kitchen.

Debra Argentina, the horticulture and nature studies teacher, said therapeutic gardening teaches kids to be present in the moment and "manage emotions in a responsible way."

Past the greenhouses are the animals the children help care for. In one fenced area, five bleating French Alpine goats stood atop downed tree stumps. In the next pen, three American Delaine Merino sheep timidly clustered together inside a red shed. A few feet away, several Rhode Island Red chickens fluttered around a coop. The largest chicken, a favorite with the children, is named Taco George.

"There is the bonding that they have with the animals, which might not be available in traditional therapy," said Charlie Ritchie, an Andrus conservationist who works with the animals.

"By taking steps toward being close to them, I think that teaches them how to deal with fear in general," said Ritchie, who added that the animals too have become less aggressive as they have had to adjust to the children.

With such hands-on programs as garden therapy and animal care, Andrus attracts students from throughout the state. The students typically receive treatment from one to three school years, according to Nancy Ment, who will retire as president and chief executive of Andrus this summer.

"This is the children's campus; it's not ours," Murphy said of the staff philosophy. "We do our best in making whole so they can go back to their family and flourish."