

Breaking the Sound Barrier

The pigs at the Hampshire High School (HHS) barn make quite a racket. Their loud 'oinks' and grunts don't bother Sammy Steele. The 19-year-old from McDowell County is deaf. He's a student at the nearby West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind.

Sammy is a regular at the barn. He, DaShawn Allen, a visually impaired student, and their Agriculture Education Instructor Veronica Milliken show up Monday through Friday from 1-3 p.m. "They come up here every day and we clean the barn and watch the pigs grow. I think it's been an exciting process for them," says Milliken.

Sammy agrees. "It was something new I wanted to try!" He communicates through sign language. Milliken interprets.

When Sammy arrived at the WVSDB as a sophomore, he signed up for as many agriculture education classes as possible. Because the student-to-teacher ratio is much smaller than a typical school, Milliken says she's able to offer more individualized instruction. Sammy works with her in the greenhouse in the morning and fixes tractor and lawn mower motors in the classroom. In the afternoon, he's ready to hit the barn.

HHS gave the WVSDB students three hogs to raise and room in their barn to care for them. When Sammy enters the barn on a typical day, he greets the pigs, makes sure they've got food and water, and then starts mucking out the pens. He works right alongside the agriculture education students from HHS.

"I think the HHS students appreciate the help," stresses Milliken. "I think it's been good for those students to see Sammy works just as hard as they do and it doesn't take any special treatment. He dives right in."

Dressed in a camo jacket and muck boots, Sammy gets busy moving dirty bedding out of the pens and putting clean hay back in. He grabs the watering hose to fill up the pig's containers, and he makes sure the animals have plenty to eat. He also stops to scratch a pig's belly between chores. He concentrates on the task at hand and helps out wherever he's needed. "Sammy has a great work ethic and takes a lot of pride in it," says Milliken.

In fact, HHS Ag Education Instructor Isaac Lewis says, "I'd love

to have Sammy work here on the farm! He pays attention. He sees things we don't."

Lewis explains while the noise and commotion in the barn distract some of his students, Sammy remains focused. He uses other senses to spot tasks left undone or find problems that were overlooked by everyone else.

During the first of March, Sammy's carefully cared-for pigs went off to slaughter. Sammy and DaShawn learned how to schedule butchering, pick out the cuts of meat, and cure hams and bacon. The finished product went up for sale April 19 on <http://www.showpig.com/> under "High School on the Hog." Half the proceeds go to HHS for the cost of the pigs, the other half Milliken splits between the WVSDB FFA chapter and Sammy and DaShawn.

While Sammy admits he loves the barn and working with plants in the greenhouse, his real passion lies under the hood of anything you can drive. During the summer and on weekends, Sammy works in an auto shop in his hometown of Justice. Once he graduates, he plans to become a mechanic. He knows the lessons in the barn will be invaluable.

"I get to show employers I've worked here in the barn. I'm responsible. I have a good work ethic. I show up on time. I take pride in my work," stresses Sammy.

As for raising pigs after graduation, Sammy says he's not sure he'll be hosting hogs anytime soon. However, Milliken stresses he'd be a great farmer just the same.

