

Checking in at the Chicken Hilton



Volunteers building the Chicken Hilton.

**JUDY HORTON
DOWN HOME RANCH
ELGIN, TEXAS**

Down Home Ranch is a great place to live for the 36 hens and three roosters living in their “Chicken Hilton,” as it was dubbed by the volunteers who built it.

It’s an even better place for the 22 men and women with intellectual disabilities who make up the heart of the Ranch community and help care for the chickens and our other livestock and gardens.

My husband Jerry and I founded a non-profit ranch community for people with disabilities after our daughter

Kelly was born 26 years ago with Down syndrome. It’s a great life with a job for everyone who wants one, and caring for the chickens is high on the list for some of our Ranchers.

Lori, the Ranch “chicken wrangler,” works with our Ranchers taking care of the chickens and tending the community gardens.

We ordered the chickens last summer as day-old chicks. They are part of Operation Independence, a project to help



Crystal with Zsa Zsa talks to Natalie during chores. Doesn’t everyone chat with a chick on their shoulder?



Michael takes a break with one of the pullets. Part of the joy of working with the flock is the pleasurable down time the Ranchers get to spend with the livestock.



Sterling enjoys working with the chickens and gardening.



Jim & Natalie with Zsa Zsa, the gentlest hen.



Matt & Judy receive the precious shipment of day-old chicks in the summer of 2010.

the Ranch become more self-sufficient, using our 340 acres to supply many of the things we need. In addition to the community gardens we also plan to erect a greenhouse dedicated to growing vegetables year round.

Four black Angus cows bred to a Japanese Wagyu bull have given birth to two bull calves and two heifers, and our ponds are full of fish for the occasional fish-fry.

Living in Central Texas, grasshoppers are an annual plague, but as soon as we began letting the chickens roam outside their run during the daylight hours—only when we can be around to keep an eye out for dogs, coyotes, and hawks—their numbers plummeted. The Ranchers love watching the “chicken soccer” games that ensue when an enterprising hen catches a large grasshopper and the chase is on!

Our first small egg appeared the morning of December 13, leading to



Natalie lets the hens out to roam for bugs and other goodies.

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Jim finds the first egg on December 13.

whoops of joy. We expect soon to have all the eggs we need and even some to sell at the local farmer's market.

Unlike many adults with intellectual disabilities that live in the country, all of our Ranchers are gainfully employed. They have developed skills in animal husbandry, maintaining barns, gardening, janitorial work, and greenhouse horticulture, and they earn good money if they work hard. This helps them contribute to their upkeep and gives them the satisfaction that comes with playing a meaningful role in sustaining their community.

When we set out to build the Ranch, we just wanted to recreate that sense of an old-fashioned neighborhood where a helping hand is never far away. We all live and work here together, and we all contribute to the common good.

Life in the country isn't for everyone, but for those who like it there's nothing better than waking up to the sweet sound of that *cock-a-doodle-do* each morning!

Jerry and Judy Horton are the Founders of Down Home Ranch, a unique ranch community where 22 adults with Down syndrome and other disabilities make their home outside of Austin, Texas. Judy blogs about life on the Ranch at www.downhomeranch.blogspot.com.

For more information, visit www.downhomeranch.org.

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