

From September 25th to December 19th in the year 2011, Belmont graduate Stephanie Brake resided in the Otago region of the South Island in New Zealand on an organic sheep and beef farm called Marama Organics. She was a participating member of Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Her host family comprised of two partners by the name of Graham Clarke, the local farmer, and Giselle McLachlan, the business manager.

Below is her brief account of the journey into discovering a personal world of physical, social and psychological healthy living:

“It all began on a warm autumn morning while the majority of America was sound asleep. I found my departure gate at Nashville International Airport before the sun peeked over the horizon, all anxious, all excited and frankly, equally scared out of my wits. I was about to step into a sequence of long plane rides, to Atlanta, to Los Angeles, to Auckland, to Christchurch, to Dunedin, and once I was finally grounded, I would finally meet my host family, foreigners, strangers, face-to-face, in-person, with no way of turning back. This would be the first occasion in all of my 22 years of life where I would be away - I mean, far, far away - from home for an extended period of time. It would be the first occasion where anyone in my family had dared cross the Pacific Ocean without wearing a military uniform. Thus in many cases among my relatives, peers and neighbors, I was probably the first of my kind period.

The primary goal was to unveil the true importance of good, clean and fair food through participation with my sponsoring organization. In exchange for voluntary labor, I would eat, sleep, be equipped and housed free of charge, in hopes to gain knowledge through the lens of a local but international perspective. New Zealand was specifically chosen because of its EPI score (i.e. environmental performance index) as well as its national involvement in eco-justice initiatives. Historically, the majority of my ancestry was centered in agriculture, and I assume my heritage followed me to college where I co-founded a chapter of Slow Food USA on Belmont's campus; we helped transform a small plot of land the university owned into a community garden and sparked an outlet of education for the movement. Yet though the work ahead was familiar, this new project was astronomical compared to my prior role(s). It asked me to leave everything behind, to come exactly how I was, and to accept the sheer responsibility should anything go wrong. I was the alpha and the omega for every decision I made for the next three months – no questions, no excuses.

Little time was wasted placing me into my living arrangements or stepping into the swing of things after two days of jetlag rest. I was immediately fitted into my work clothing and gum boats. On lodging matters, I settled into a bright red, three bedroom cottage that occupied up to 6-8 people. It was as tidy as I kept it. It didn't have central heat or air; if I was cold, I was forced to learn how to build a proper fire, and if I was scorching, I opened windows and doors but kept the rooms as dark as possible. Space

wasn't an issue. I had all of the appliances and etc I needed; lots of book shelves too. There were no locks on the doors. There was a compost toilet separate from the house, which did not have plumbing. To be mindful of water, I gave myself no longer than 10 to 15 minutes for a shower. Trash was burned daily in a drum bin 100 yards away. I recycled or re-used as much as possible (i.e. glass, plastic containers, metal cans), but cardboard went to the worm farm.

On eating matters, over 90% of the food I consumed was locally or organically grown or both, even the meats. The water came from a nearby creek and was pumped to the farm through a piping system; it was safe to drink on tap without the aid of a purifier. I got my eggs from the chicken house. I got all my dairy products from Missy, the house cow, which included milk and learning how to make butter, yogurt and various cheeses from scratch. Many of the veggies and herbs for various meals came straight out of the garden and/or greenhouse. On any given day, I cooked my breakfast and dinner. "Smoko", a term for morning tea known by Kiwi farmers, and lunches were shared together with Graham and Giselle. We daily baked our own bread usually combining ingredients exempt of gluten. Sometimes we added a variety of nuts or dried fruits into the mixtures too. Food scraps either went to the compost bucket, worm farm or was fed to the chickens as a snack.

Since I was the only wwoofer at the time of my arrival, I took on the most important task of taking care of the animals not located in the roaming paddocks. Here were the contents of a normal day with those lovely non-humanoids, as instructed by Giselle...

8 am – 1. Feed lambs; take their bedding out of their drum to hang out to dry on fence; check they have water.

2. Milk Missy; fill her water bucket up.

3. Let dogs out; put Kuna & Rose together with their chains, then onto dog lead which is hanging on kennel; fill up their water bowls (nearest door); use small shovel hanging up beside water tap to clean out any mess the dogs have made.

4. Fill cat bowls once inside.

5. Then walk all the dogs to the top of the hill (airstrip)! If hot weather, on the way back, there is a round water trough on the left hand side on flat piece of road near the horses; let them all drink and swim if they want to! Walk for an hour; they need it! Once back, tie the dogs up under the large tree if dry or in garage if wet; give them a bone or pig's ear to chew on; Kuna can have milk or eggs or something! Make sure they can access water to drink and let off every two hours for break/toilet.

Have a cold drink, cup of coffee, play with the lambs!

Lunchtime – say 1:00 pm? 1. Let chickens out; put some food scraps into their netted outdoor area; collect eggs for house.

2. Collect our mail & newspapers from the letterbox; feel free to read the newspapers!

3. Take dogs for a wander but away from Missy!

4. Feed lambs their mid-day meal.

Around 4:00 pm – Take dogs for another long walk.

Around 5:00 pm – Milk Missy.

Around 7:00 pm – 1. Put chickens to bed!

2. Put dogs into their kennels with fresh water, some dog roll [say 3-4 inches wide] and

biscuits [4-6 each]; take care to keep well away from Missy!

3. Ted gets fed once they are all done; he can have some milk, meat scraps or egg and some dog biscuits from jar in pantry (looks like dog food).

4. Feed lambs last time.

5. Fill cat bowls for night.

Gardening took up most of my week once more volunteers were present. We all alternated between house duty, animal care and yard work, but gardening was certainly my delight and what I was most qualified to do. Some of the basics this entailed were weed eating the property, watering the greenhouse, weeding the existing beds, creating seedlings, planting seedlings and sprouts directing into prepared ground, planting trees, making eggshell fertilizer, netting berry bushes and young trees, painting signs, forming teepees with stakes and string, throwing food scraps into the worm farm and fencing. And, of course, growing veggies and herbs that complimented beautiful with the soft and rich New Zealand soil: tomato, asparagus, cucumber, broad bean, pak choi, snap pea, pea, gooseberry, chamomile, parsnip, silver beet, florence fennel, celery, strawberry, rhubarb, garlic, rosemary, cauliflower, lettuce, cabbage, beetroot, parsley, dill, pumpkin, courgette, kale, lemon, spring onion, cilantro, spinach, broccoli and my favorite, leek.

Twenty or so days had passed on the farm when Graham and Giselle sat me down to discuss the plans for the next week ahead. They told me they were hoping to send me on a wellness retreat in a mountain town called Wanaka. It'd take three hours to get there, where I'd then be dropped off in front of the lake and proceed on foot to the nearby hostel. I'd have five full days to myself, to meet with a naturopath, to hike for hours, to sunbath at the beach, to walk in deep thought, to write poetry and fill out postcards, to get lost in a book, to have a chance to reconnect with my body and mind again. At first my conscience was roaring with guilt because it sounded like a mini vacation, and I certainly hadn't earned my keep yet. Then I hopped on the bus at Rae's Junction on day one and got off at Gore on day six and knew it was the best gift they could have offered me. I was given a chance and a choice to save my own skin because Dr. Margaret Balogh, my holistic health specialist, specifically revealed the light.

When it was all said and done and reflected on, I spent 40+ hours in flight and almost 12 hours in layover. I jumped 18 time zones forward, two hemispheres and all of the constellations in the sky were new to me. I covered an approximate distance of 19,100 miles between getting there and returning to Tennessee. I earned an independency on modern electronics and a reconnection to the environment around me; it was the healthiest I had ever been before and the most alive I'd ever felt. My physical, social and psychological spirits sang together.

Which brings me to admit, I should conclude with my latest results. Presently, I've lost over 7 inches in my waist, 45 pounds of saturated fat and gained over 6 pounds of muscle growth since that warm autumn morning at BNA. Special thanks to the Team at Marama Organics, WWOOF New Zealand and the Committee of the Lumos Foundation for providing such a rewarding opportunity and experience. Cause neither riches or power or the guarantee of fame could replace the memories created while abroad."