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COWS AT SCHOOL

SHIRLEY SKEEL

Jeff Byers has an unconventional solution for world strife. “If everyone had a cow, the world would be a more peaceful place,” he says in a solemn tone. It’s not exactly a workable plan in practice. But Byers does what he can to introduce harassed city folk to this slow and serene vegetarian.

This particular day he is at Bessie Carmichael School, a squat, terra cotta-colored building south of Mission Street in San Francisco, where many Filipino, Hispanic, and Cambodian children spend their days. His big Chevy truck has pulled into the schoolyard, towing an even bigger white van, marked “Dairy Council of California, Mobile Classroom.” He opens the rear doors and hauls out a bucket of carrots and artichokes, then leads out a long-legged calf and ties it behind the van.

He’s just in time. The school doors swing open and the wall of noise that only 200 excited kids can make pours into the playground. Two by two, the children plop down before the van for a quick lesson in bovine etiquette.

“Call me Mr. Jeff. I want *no noise*. Cows don’t like noise,” says Byers, who was a teacher before he became an instructor in the Dairy Council’s nutrition education program. “And the cow behaves like a cow. If she acts like a cow, *do not* laugh at her. She’ll chew and she’ll gulp and she may stick her tongue in her nose. *Pleeease* do not laugh at her.”

He opens the van’s side doors. Electra, or Ellie for short, is big. Huge. Maybe eight feet long and five feet high. Black and white and a mother of three, she is an 1,800-pound Holstein heifer with the hips of an army sergeant and the eyes of a saint.

The children go silent. Two girls put their hands over their mouths. A serious-faced redhead frowns. The kids are aged five to eleven and many have only seen cows on television. But the cool retain their cool. A young man with a peacock-colored tuft of hair looks bored and knowing. His neighbor hugs a basketball.

Jeff scans the kids’ faces, then the lesson begins. Ellie, offered a fistful of alfalfa, demonstrates how you tackle the ritual of eating when—like the deer, camel, goat, and giraffe—you have four stomachs. Thirty-nine chews, a gulp, a pause, and the food slides

back up for a second work-over.

The kids learn that Ellie walks on two toes, has 32 teeth, and takes nine months to give birth. And she's not stupid. Every day, Saturday and Sunday included, she waits at the gate of Moon Glow Dairy, at Moss Landing on Monterey Bay, for Jeff to take her to school. She is affectionate, patient, and never gets riled.

Can the same be said for kids? Jeff decides to find out. He grabs a teat and squirts a stream of warm milk into the front row. The children screech and reel in horror.

Five-year-old Daniela later admits she didn't know milk came from a cow. Arnrow, 8, says there's "no way" she would ever milk a cow. Then, perhaps having learned a thing or two from reality TV, she relents: "I would if you gave me \$10,000." Shannell, 11, declares Ellie "cool."

But wait. There's still Della, the calf. Jeff leads her out, and the children wiggle into a line to meet her. Some pet her tentatively, some draw back.

"I think he's a girl, because the bottom is a girl," observes eight-year-old Leo.

Jeff Byers, 53, takes cows to some 600 schools a year. The Dairy Council of California's four mobile classrooms visit 235,000 children in urban elementary schools each year. They work out of Culver City, Irvine, Sacramento, and Oakland. Because the demand is so great, some schools wait five years for a visit. Local dairy farmers have footed the bill for the education program for 85 years. (California has 2,300 dairy farms, ranging in size from small family farms to operations with over 1,000 cows.)

Sure, Jeff says, cynics might see this as a marketing ploy to sell more milk. But "most of the dairymen I know . . . they're doing it as a public service. A lot have come through 4-H (agricultural club) and the public service ethic is instilled in them."

Carmen Kirk, a fourth-grade teacher, believes the cow's visit helps her foreign-born students understand their new home. Ellie's performance crosses all language barriers.

However, by the time the mobile dairy pulls out of the school yard, not every question is answered. Chewing on pizza back in the classroom, Jeremiah struggles to fit Della into the world he knows.

“Can the little calf play catch? Will it go after a stick or something?” he inquires.

Too bad Byers is gone. He may not be alone in wishing that every family owned a cow. ♦

Elementary schools that would like to sign up to have a cow visit should call the Dairy Council of California: (916) 263-3560.

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