

FOR *Love* OF A PIG

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photographed
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except where noted



At the original property of Happily Ever Esther Farm Sanctuary (HEEFS), a memorial trail lets visitors view stones that honour animal residents who passed away. A stone at the entrance reads "Esther Forever." HEEFS has relocated to a larger property, and the original farm has a new purpose.



Esther the Wonder Pig may be gone, but her legacy lives on. The “kindness movement” she inspired has doubled in power with the move of the Happily Ever Esther Farm Sanctuary to a bigger property west of the Niagara Escarpment near Hamilton. The original farm also has new life as an agrotourism destination, supporting other sanctuaries that are less visible without a media star like Esther.



▲ Esther the Wonder Pig in 2016, in the barn for breakfast, wearing a cupcake cape and giving a wary eye to Mike Davis. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

You'll find more pigs than ponies at a former horse farm 20 km from the original location of Happily Ever Esther Farm Sanctuary (HEEFS) in Campbellville. HEEFS moved to the new site in October 2024, carrying on the work of rescuing abused and neglected farmed animals sparked by Esther the Wonder Pig back in 2015.

"The move to our new farm was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that came about through the generosity of a supporter who made an equity donation, in addition to a bequest that was given to the sanctuary," explains Derek

Walter, HEEFS' executive director. "It's an amazing step up for the residents."

The property has about triple the acreage and plenty of room to grow. The higher elevation reduces the chance of flooding. The barns have three times as many stalls, which allows rambunctious goats to be separated from sheep. A riding arena became a pig village, and there's plenty of room to rotate pastures.

The property also allows HEEFS to expand its rescue and educational programs, welcoming more visitors to experience the mission of saving animals.

A New Purpose for Esther's Home

Meanwhile, rather than have Esther's first sanctuary sold and its storied history lost, HEEFS co-founder Steve Jenkins launched a fundraising campaign to keep the farm "in the family." Just as many people donated to the campaign to keep the farm as had been involved in its start.

"It meant a lot to many people in Esther's community that we keep the site," Steve says.

Taking back its original name, Cedar Brook Farm, the property will reopen this year as an agrotourism destination. The cow pasture will become

lavender and sunflower fields. There will be pick-your-own flowers and a pumpkin patch, a special event venue and guest accommodations. Produce from the orchard and a sprawling vegetable garden will go to local animal sanctuaries.

All profits will be donated to Operation Angels, a charitable organization created by Steve and his team. It honours Esther's legacy by providing financial support and educational programs for animal sanctuaries in Canada, the U.S., UK and Australia, many of which struggle without the visibility from a star attraction like Esther.



▲ At the new location for HEEFS, a flying Esther on the sanctuary sign waves her magic wand of kindness.



◀ The original property has resumed its previous name and now works to help other farmed animal sanctuaries and rescue organizations.

While the farm won't be a full sanctuary itself, it does have a small number of rescued animals by special request, a few pigs, sheep, turkeys, ducks and one llama. Visitors can take part in work days and community events, see the lagoon Esther loved and walk the memorial trail, lined with some 77 stones representing residents who lived out their lives on the property.

Esther's Early Days

Niagara Escarpment Views readers may be familiar with Esther, as are people around the world, in some 46 countries, at last count.

Adopted in 2012, Esther was a bright, playful pet who quickly captured the hearts of her "dads," Steve and Derek. As she grew, it became obvious this was no mini pig, and their suburban house in Georgetown was no place to keep what turned out to be a 260-kg animal. Raising funds to buy a farm in Campbellville, the family moved to what became HEEFS in 2015.

HEEFS grew beyond that one special pig. It became a registered charity, whose mission is to rescue abused, neglected and abandoned farmed animals, providing them a safe, life-long home. Some of these residents had been abandoned in a ditch or rental home or were found wandering in the woods. Some young animals aged out of petting zoos, and sometimes a person bought a pig or goat to roast and had a change of heart.

The result is a menagerie of about 65 rescues that includes pigs, cows, sheep, fowl, goats and one bonded pair: BJ the donkey and Escalade the horse. The environment allows animals to thrive, experience freedom and embrace the joy that comes with a second chance at life.

Esther embodied that joy. She sparkled on social media in cheeky poses, often



▲ Derek Walter with HEEFS resident Sammy. The Yorkshire pig was found abandoned in a ditch and tied to a crate.

sporting colourful sunglasses, wigs, sunbonnets and capes from her vast, often cupcake-themed wardrobe. Her fame spread in a TEDx Talk, several books and media interviews with CBC, CTV News, *The Washington Post* and more, although a planned movie fell through. Celebrity fans include comedian Ricky Gervais and climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Because of Esther, thousands opened their eyes and hearts to see pigs and all animals as individuals. Her life helped others see the magic of kindness and the power of a smile. That hasn't stopped with her death.

▼ About two dozen pigs call HEEFS home. The new property has enough space to rotate pasture use, giving the soil a break, allowing grasses to regrow naturally and helping prevent overgrazing.





▲ Steve Jenkins is proud of the garden at Cedar Brook Farm, which includes kidney beans, cantaloupe, rainbow corn, cucumber, gourds, honeydew melons, pumpkins, spaghetti squash, watermelons and Sicilian zucchini.



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◀ To let Esther beat the summer heat, a lagoon was built for her, which was a great improvement over the stack of kiddie pools that she used to lie in. Watching Esther “bathe” was a highlight for touring visitors. The lagoon remains, in her memory.



▶ The heart-hands gesture represents love and friendship. Close-up photos of volunteers’ hands forming hearts make up a quilt-like sign on the HEEFS barn.

Esther’s Legacy

Esther became ill in October 2017 and was taken to the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph. Unfortunately, the imaging tools needed to diagnose a large animal like Esther were not available in Canada at the time.

Within four months, generous supporters raised \$750,000 to buy a massive CT scanner big enough to hold Esther. It’s now housed at the vet college with the stipulation that farm sanctuaries can use the machine at no charge.

Esther’s eventual diagnosis was cancer. Surgery and medication prolonged her life, but she went through more health challenges and the pandemic before dying in her sleep on October 18, 2023 at the age of 11.

Her memory lives on, now in two physical locations as well as the minds and hearts of thousands, including her dads, although they have since split up. What started with one pig has blossomed into a full “kindness movement” guided

by humour and a positive attitude. Not a bad legacy for one little pig.

How You Can Help

Visit HEEFS (<https://www.happilyeveresther.ca/>) and Cedar Brook Farm (<https://stevejenkins.ca/cedar-brook-farm>), online and in person. Attend volunteer work events and help plant, tend and harvest the gardens; maintain the grounds; or give piggy belly rubs.

Donate money or goods/services for auctions.

Buy a T-shirt, tote bag, mug, Esther’s *10 Years of Magic* book or other merchandise.

Follow, like and comment on social media posts to increase Esther’s reach.

Encourage friends



▲ By a stencil made from a stamp of her hoof, Esther’s footprints lead home across the rainbow bridge at the entrance to Cedar Brook Farm.

and family to see farm animals in the same light as companion animals.

Sign and share petitions that oppose animal cruelty.

Be kind to all kinds. **NEV**

Sue Horner wrote “Cold Case Hunters Keep a Spotlight on Missing People” for the Winter 2025-26 issue of this magazine. Esther was previously featured in the Winter 2017-18 issue.



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