

## TIKKUN FARM

*A city farm sows seeds of hope and food to go*

**Sarah Haselhorst**

Cincinnati Enquirer | USA TODAY NETWORK

I didn't stumble on Tikkun Farm by accident.

It was February and I was bundled up in my apartment in Columbia, Missouri, where winter breeze blew through cracks of my century-old windows. I was cold, looking for warmth.

"Farmhouse retreat – 20 mins from downtown Cincinnati", the Airbnb listing read. It was the first long-stay offering I'd seen that promised more than barebones furniture and a gut-punch price tag.

A photo of a stoic alpaca stared back at me. I scrolled further. A path of fuchsia flowers led to a rust-red barn. Farm fresh eggs were nestled in a carton that read 'heal, repair, restore.' Roosters, hens and the promise of a pot-bellied pig convinced me. I needed to stay at the farm over the summer.

A week passed and I'd waited too long. Someone had scooped up the storybook listing.

And by March, the pandemic decimated my life in Columbia. I didn't think about the farm, instead, like many people throughout the world, I felt immobilized. It wasn't until late April that my decision to go to Cincinnati to work as an intern, despite the pandemic, was solidified.

I began to search again, this time knowing I'd be working remotely. The Tikkun Farm listing reappeared.

And there I was, two weeks later, hands glued to the steering wheel as I navigated through sheets of



**Tikkun Farm in Mount Healthy acts as a gathering place for its community. GRACE PRITCHETT/THE ENQUIRER**



**Volunteer Noah Seng, 15, carries a box of cabbage at the Tikkun Farm, in Mount Healthy on May 29. CARA OWSLEY/THE ENQUIRER**



Mount Healthy resident Tina Ascough feeds the animals on

**Mount Healthy resident Tina Ascough feeds the animals on Tikkun Farm on June 9. Ascough began attending Tikkun Farm's classes last fall after her husband passed and now volunteers regularly with her two children. GRACE PRITCHETT/THE ENQUIRER**

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rain and blinding white skies during a five-hour drive from St. Louis to Cincinnati. The rain had quelled by the time I made it into Mt. Healthy, where Tikkun Farm is planted.

Distracted, my eyes darted around Hamilton Avenue, off the North College Hill/Mt. Healthy exit. It was more than unusual that a farm would be here, I thought, as Walgreens, an animal hospital, a tire shop and a gas station came into my view all at once.

I was skeptical.

The last turn was Elizabeth Street.

My tires managed to find every rainsoaked pothole that dotted the way to Tikkun Farm. As I parked and then meandered, luggage in tow, into the threestory farmhouse, I was too drained to realize all the cars parked around me. I didn't notice the Sunday commotion. I didn't ask what was happening.

"We'll take you on a tour and show you the animals," the Rev. Mary Laymon, the farm's co-owner, told me with her perpetual smile, when we met later that afternoon. I nodded and began to unpack.

We never did tour the farm, but that night, an ochre sun fell behind the rusted barn and the night sent a tepid breeze throughout the house and into my second-story window. It was a different air than the one that filled my room in Columbia three months earlier.

I relaxed knowing this was going to be home for the next 10 weeks.

The farm in the middle of a city – named after a derivative of Tikkun Olam, a Hebrew phrase meaning "repair the world" – isn't misplaced. It was exactly where it needs to be. For some, it's a deep breath. For others, a place to heal. And since the pandemic, it's helped give people meaning and nurturing.

And not just to me.

-- It's hard to imagine Tikkun Farm was once dilapidated when I hear the wind tickle the chimes in the 70-foot weeping pine or walk the winding green gardens tended by Bhutanese farmers.

They'd prepare the meals; shake together spice packets, separate protein into individual packages and weigh out grains and starches. There'd be no cooking involved.

Relief passed over her, "It still felt daunting to me, but not completely impossible," Laymon remembered.

Weeks passed, volunteers multiplied until they became 100 strong, and ready-to-cook Crock-Pot meals were handed out to feed what has now grown to almost 300 families. On Sundays, cars snaked up the Tikkun Farm driveway, a man in an orange vest directed traffic.

"We just brought a demand and a supply together," Reiber, who joked about her economics degree, said.

Though the demand isn't a myth.

The pandemic left people jobless. It put many on weekslong furlough. Reiber sees it often – a person will drive up to the farm, get out of their car and wander. It takes them 30 minutes to walk over to her or another volunteer to pick up food. Many struggle to write down their address on paperwork the farm needs to apply for future grant funding.

Their hesitancy is out of shame, Reiber explained.

Sometimes people will pull from their pockets crumpled up dollar bills. The food is free, she tells them. Reiber's eyes well up as she talks about it.

"If you can use it, you can take it," she'll encourage people.

And without pause, people will turn to Reiber and say: "How can I help?"

-- It was 7:15 a.m. when I met brightfaced Tina Ascough. She came prepared, dressed in a burgundy T-shirt and shorts, her feet clad with floral rain boots.

"I'm not a farm girl," warns me. I look down at my tennis shoes, "Neither am I," I tell her.

She walks me through feeding the animals. The fatter pig, Max, squeals at her.

Ascough tosses corn and grain pellets at the chickens, hens, ducks and roosters. They squabble, but it's one alpaca, with a distinct white mark at his chin, that gives

The home was uninhabitable when they bought it in 2010, Laymon said. The roof leaked. There was no electricity. They had no foundation in place.

When they began to roast coffee and grow lettuce, they alerted the surrounding neighbors. Without a stable building, they propped open lawn chairs to show their goods. Laymon and York didn't have high hopes.

But people came en masse.

"They wanted to know what was going to happen here, because it's a little dead-end street," Laymon said.

From there, Laymon and York continued to heal their home. They opened it to the community as Tikkun Farm – healing people, repairing communities and restoring creation.

But healing what Laymon calls a "polarized community" wasn't in a day's work. Down the road, there's a United Dairy Farmers store, take a left turn and three blocks down is a low-income, African American community.

African American children predominate Mt. Healthy public schools and the white children mostly attend private schools. They're afraid of each other, Laymon said.

One day, before she began programming at Tikkun Farm, six grade-schoolers ran up to the barn. They scribbled their names on the wood in Magic marker and dumped out piles of corn.

It struck a chord in Laymon.

"I knew that there was a local afterschool hangout place," she said. "I showed up, and I showed him the names of the people who'd sign their name on the wall of my barn."

She got her answer and called their parents.

"I'm glad you want to visit the farm," she told them. "I want you to visit our farm, but I really don't want you to ever do this again. You want to feed our chickens? Great. Let me show you how to do that."

A week later, the six children came back to learn how to take care of baby chicks. Then the children came back with their friends. The love of the farm grew.

The community had bought in. Her reach widened.

her trouble. He dunks his head into the yellow bucket that dangles from Ascough's hand. It's full of food.

She turns her back to him and laughs.

In the moment with Ascough, it's hard to see her pain. She's at peace. She smiles. She and her daughter ask how they can help one another.

But when she steps back, she's open about the emotions coursing through her mind.

"I think I kind of lost my little bit of faith when my husband passed away," Ascough said. "I was kind of withdrawn and I just found a need to be with people."

When her job at a local insurance agency ordered her to work from home, it was difficult for Ascough. She couldn't get the same social interactions that she longed for.

Volunteering at Tikkun Farm filled that emptiness for her. She feeds the animals and delivers Crock-Pot meals to families.

"When we deliver food, it'd kind of like healing the entire family unit," Ascough said. "It's not just healing your spirit, it's healing you all around."

She brought her two children, too. Farm work has helped her 16-year-old son come out of his own emotional isolation. He chronically uses DoorDash to order his meals, which keeps him cooped up in his room, Ascough explained. But one day, he emerged from his room to help cook one of the Crock-Pot meals – a lasagna.

It was the first time Ascough remembers the three of them cooking. It's a bright memory she recalls in their dark two-and-a-half years without her husband. She tells me, quietly, her husband would've loved Tikkun Farm.

"It's my peaceful place," she said.

I look at her and nod in agreement.

And I understand, because I live in the storybook listing.

**Tina Ascough carries produce at Tikkun Farm, a 3.5-acre farm in Mount Healthy intends to be a place of healing, restoration and repair cultivated through meaningful work and spiritual practices.**

-- Laymon made me a pour-over coffee with beans roasted by Deeper Roots Coffee Roastery on my first morning. The roastery used to function out of the farm, she said.

She gently tipped the boiling tea kettle into a coffee cone, "If you're patient," she interrupted herself with her own laughter, "You let the water and coffee sit for a few minutes before you pour the rest."

"It helps them meet each other," Greg York, Tikkun Farm co-owner and Laymon's husband, explained.

Laymon tells me about the beans. The roastery. And then, the milk house. Before it was Tikkun Farm, the 3.5-acre plot was a dairy farm. Lately, the milk house, a pale yellow building with its original wide brick floors, has held a different purpose.

Before COVID-19, yoga mats stretched across the floor. Its kitchen was bursting with cooks, creating Crock-Pot meals. Clumps of alpaca wool sat on drying racks. Children's paintings hung from clothespins clipped onto a string that spread across the room.

In March, that all changed.

The pandemic restricted Tikkun Farm's operations – cooking classes, workshops and kids' camps. Now, the milk house is filled with boxes. I stare at the writing on one of them. "There's 1,200 tortillas in here," I exclaim to Raeann Reiber who's been volunteering on the farm in December. That's nothing, she tells me, and opens a minifridge with 110 pounds of cheese puzzled inside.

Reiber remembers the farm from when she was a child growing up in Mt. Healthy. She used to sneak to the back of Elizabeth Street and play on the land. Not far different from the kids who scrawled their names on the barn.

Now, she helps coordinate a Friday and Saturday food pantry of sorts and a Sunday ready-to-make Crock-Pot meal bags service.

This was never the work Laymon expected to do. She's still firm, her passion is helping heal individual trauma in the community through cooking, writing and yoga.

She never could've imagined feeding hundreds of families for free during a pandemic.

"One of the chefs who was working with us for the cooking class said, 'You know, the kids are going to get food from school, but it's not going to be enough,'"

**Ascough is a volunteer at the farm.** CARA OWSLEY/THE ENQUIRER

**The alpacas at Tikkun Farm in Mount Healthy live together under the barn with a variety of other animals including pigs, chickens and geese.** GRACE PRITCHETT/THE ENQUIRER

**Raeann Reiber takes a box of produce from Tina Ascough at Tikkun Farm, a 3.5-acre farm in Mount Healthy, that will later be given away to those in need of food. They both volunteer at the farm.** CARA OWSLEY/THE ENQUIRER

Laymon recalled. ““What if you start taking this extra food that the food pantry has and turn it into dinners?””  
A local food pantry had been giving Laymon their excess food over the weekends for her cooking classes before COVID-19 crept in. But the idea of running a feeding program during a pandemic overwhelmed her.

“I can’t do this,” she told him. The scale was too big.

But he calmed her nerves. The process would be no different than what they’d been doing.

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