

The Founders of Foothill Frolic Farm and Forest School

Matthew Neal and Allie Mills Neal

Matthew is a Tennessee native, hailing from the mid-state. His education took him to the Northeast of the United States, followed by years of adventure living and agricultural work in the Pacific Northwest. Matthew also spent many years in commercial property management, overseeing building projects and being the sole proprietor of several businesses.

Matthew is a natural communicator with all walks of life, dedicated to illuminating, conveying, and achieving positive outcomes for all involved. He is also a supreme all-around windmill of trades, with the ability to design, build, repair, and create just about anything needed or desired—from electrical installations and water systems to furniture, unique lighting fixtures, and structures. Both Matthew and Allie are handy woodworkers and enjoy taking a piece of lumber from the sawmill all the way through to whatever it is that needs to be built.

Today, as a founding member of Foothill Frolic Farm and Forest School, his role involves administration and facility management, along with the assortment of practical building, maintenance, and problem-solving that comes with creating a school from the ground up.

Allie, as well, is a native Tennessean, born right here in the foothills of Northeast Tennessee. She grew up roaming, playing, helping, and observing right here on this historic Gammon-Mills Farm. At about the age of twelve, she started running—and has yet to stop.

Her athletic journey eventually led her to Belmont University, where she competed as a collegiate Division I Cross Country and Track athlete. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor's Degree in Biology and Chemistry and was named Belmont University's Female Presidential Scholar-Athlete of the Year, the highest combined athletic and academic honor given individually to a graduating student-athlete.

Although Allie did not major directly in agriculture or attend culinary school, her biology and chemistry degree served her well. It gave her a strong foundation in the sciences and placed her in a location that opened many doors and introduced her to people, ideas, foods, farms, and ways of living that would become major influences in her life.

Very soon after graduating from college, Allie became smitten with the interconnectedness of organic farming, nature, health, education, and real organic foods. What began as an interest in farm-to-plate living grew into a life priority that has now spanned more than twenty years.

She has been actively growing, preparing, and educating and advocating for local, organic, and seasonal foods ever since, and has always found such zeal in the seasonal availability of organically raised, farm-fresh growings. She has also worked as a personal cook specializing in local-organic-seasonal foods, including serving as the personal cook for Robert Lipman of Lipman Brothers, LLC.

These many years of experiences have naturally carried forward into the work she is now doing with Foothill Frolic Farm and Forest School. Today, as a founding member of the school, Allie is deeply involved in the educational, agricultural, and food-related aspects of the farm and school. Her role involves helping to shape the school's vision and philosophy, contributing to curriculum

development and educational programming, and bringing forth project-based ideas and hands-on learning possibilities that naturally emerge from the farm, forest, and surrounding land, while helping to create the overall learning environment.

Matthew and Allie met in Nashville in 2003 at Dragon Park, when Matthew asked Allie to randomly throw a Frisbee with him. That simple and rather random invitation began a partnership that has continued ever since, with their two lives becoming increasingly intertwined.

The years that followed became deeply steeped in conservation land management, local food advocacy, hands-on farming education, organic farming, building, structure design, woodworking, cooking, and the practical skills of creating and sustaining a life close to the land.

Matthew and Allie eventually established Arugula's Star of Neal Family Farms in the community of Bethel, Tennessee, southwest of Nashville. Primarily a certified organic vegetable and CSA farm, Arugula's Star also became a place for sharing knowledge and experience through an Educational Hands-On Internship Program, where others could come and actually participate in the work of a small farm—not simply hear about it.

In 2019, Matthew, Allie, and their son, Eastenn Dutch, decided to move back to her generational family farm here in Northeast Tennessee. They established Foothill Frolic Farm on Gammon Creek, building upon the cattle farming tradition that was already here and working to enhance it through a regenerative, rotationally grazed, organically raised local custom beef farm program.

Coming home to this farm was much more than simply moving back to a piece of property. This is the land where Allie herself grew up. It is the land where she spent her childhood roaming, playing, helping, observing, learning, and developing an early relationship with the natural world that would eventually influence so much of her adult life.

And now, remarkably, her own son is growing up here too.

In 2026, the Gammon-Mills Farm is a three-generation working family farm, with three generations of family actively living, working, and carrying forward a way of life rooted in this land. In a time when multi-generational working farms are becoming increasingly rare, there is something especially meaningful about continuing this particular one—a farm whose roots reach back through the Gammon family for centuries.

For Matthew and Allie, this continuity is not something they take lightly. It carries with it a sense of stewardship: not simply owning land, but receiving something that was cared for by those who came before and doing their best to care for it well enough that it can continue on to those who come after.

Here they are in 2026, still going strong, selling an average of 50–60 whole beefs per farming year and continuing to build upon the farm, the land, the animals, and the community that surrounds them.

Alongside the farm and business, Matthew, Allie, and Eastenn Dutch have been a homeschooling family, using primarily farm-based, project-based, nature-based, and Waldorf-inspired educational aspects. In truth, the desire to create some form of simple primitive, nature/farm-based, agrarian school with holistic values, one-room-schoolhouse-type educational

program had been quietly pulling at both of them for many years—really, even before they had children.

For Allie and Matthew, the pieces have always seemed to fit together. Organic farming, nature, health, education, real working projects, business ownership, craftsmanship, and real foods have never felt like separate subjects to them. They are interconnected pieces of a way of life that they have been actively living, learning, working, and advocating for over the past twenty-plus years.

Foothill Frolic School is the natural convergence of all of those years, experiences, passions, and persistent little pulls. It is not something that appeared suddenly, nor is it simply a school that happens to be located on a farm. It is an expression of the life Matthew and Allie have been cultivating for many years—a belief that children deserve the opportunity to learn through real work, nature, imagination, responsibility, craftsmanship, food, and meaningful connection to the living world around them.

Their hope is to create something simple, beautiful, useful, and deeply rooted: a place where children can roam, observe, wonder, make, build, grow, work, get dirty, ask questions, solve problems, care for living things, and discover that learning is not something that only happens when sitting at a desk.

And perhaps most importantly, they hope to help preserve something that has become increasingly uncommon: the opportunity for children to grow up knowing the land they live on, participating in the work that sustains it, and understanding that they are part of something that began long before them and, if cared for well, can continue long after them.

For Allie, there is something especially full-circle about that.

She grew up on this farm.

She left, learned, explored, ran, farmed, cooked, built, taught, and eventually found her way back home.

Now her own little boy is growing up on the same land.

And in 2026, three generations are still working this farm.

Foothill Frolic Farm and Forest School is, in many ways, simply the next chapter of that story.