

Relocation has modest effect on Ohio agritourism business

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CLARKSVILLE, Ohio — Bonnie Mercuri and her family had what many farmers would call "a piece of the rock."

Since 1967 they had operated Bonnybrook Farms, a 95-acre working farm and farm market in a posh suburb of Dayton, Ohio. Many considered them entrepreneurs in the agri-entertainment business in the Miami Valley.

But three years ago the family decided to relocate to Clarksville, population 497. The new 350-acre farm is on the border of Warren and Clinton counties and requires a 30-minute drive from either Dayton or Cincinnati.

"We got an offer we couldn't refuse," Mercuri said. "I loved that farm near Dayton. It was my father's farm and I thought I'd never move. But we had an offer on this lovely land in Warren County and we just felt if we moved that our kids would move out there with us and the move came at the right time. I literally thank God every day that we made the move."

Moving an established business doesn't always pan out. But for Mercuri and her husband, Joe, things worked out just fine.

"We were amazed at the number of people who followed us," she said. "Last year was our first six full weekends of Fall Farm Days here in Clarksville and we saw people who frequented that Dayton location."

The Mercuris' loyal customers base from Dayton have followed. Her new clientele from Cincinnati has yet to arrive.

"People from the Cincinnati area are slower to come because we're new to them," she said, "but once they realize we offer educational field trips, offer spring and fall tours and have tour guides they'll find us."

After purchasing the land in Clarksville her family had to refurbish the land, which was once home to a tree farm. That was the easy part. The hard part was leaving one established business in hopes of creating a similar one in a new location.

"Our family was in the horse business for 40 years," Mercuri said. "I dealt with riding instruction, while my husband dealt with competitive horse shows. We had up to 63 horses on the premise at



one time. I was just tired of that same old grind and wanted something different."

Horses can still be found, but they're not dominating the landscape as they once were. In keeping with tradition of the old farm, the newly created Bonnybrook Farms offers hayrides, haunted hayrides, a pumpkin patch, corn maze, corporate picnics and the traditional Fall Farm Days. New to the farm this fall will be a chuck wagon dinner ride.

"Everything has been about the same as it was up north, only the corporate picnics have slowed due to the stressed economy," Mercuri said.

Other activities include a petting barn, catch-and-release fishing pond, a 40-foot underground slide, swings, sandboxes, cornhole, volleyball trails, meadows, county fair games, pumpkin coloring contest, barnyard hunt and plenty of food.

Schools in the three-county area use the farm for spring and fall field trips for children in preschool through third grade.

"Our curriculum supports Ohio's Science Standards for Life Sciences through multi-sensory, hands-on interaction and encounters with living things," Mercuri said. "We have experienced field trip guides trained in adapting tours to the appropriate age or grade level."

Mercuri and Joe once put all their energy into their horses. Now their concern is keeping customers happy.

"Ag is very important to us so when people come out here we want them to have a farm experience as much as possible," she said.

Bonnybrook Farms is located at 3779 state Route 132 in Clarksville. The farm can be reached at 937-289-2500 or simply visit online at www.bonnybrookfarms.com



GIANT SLINGSHOTS is one of many entertainment items found on this farm near Clarksville. Other attractions include clodhopper golf, pony rides, tractor-drawn rides, face painting, live bands and plenty of food. (Doug Graves photos)