

*Judy Seaton visits with her livestock on the farm where she provides a temporary home for women and children.*



Story and Photos by Toni Garrard Clay

# A Place to Start Again

*If everything collapses tomorrow* and people are forced to exist in a world without restaurants, retail stores or online shopping, Judy Seaton will do just fine. Thank you.

Judy is a cheerful throwback to the kind of woman it's hard to find nowadays outside a Laura Ingalls Wilder book. She keeps goats for their milk, which is also used to make cheese. The fleece from her sheep is woven into textiles. She dries her own herbs and has shelves full of food she canned.

In short, she's an independent woman, and that is exactly what she wants for other women — especially those who are in need, at their wits' end or just exhausted beyond their ability to cope or plan for the future.

"I really didn't plan on doing this," said Judy. "God just set things in motion, and I went with it."

For many years, Judy owned a business in Athens. "People started appearing at my back door for help. So I fixed up a spare room for them to stay in until we could find a place for them."

Judy sold her store in July of 1997. Tragically, her husband was killed three months later in a power line accident. It wasn't long after that, her world having been turned upside down, that Judy began to bring women in need to her small farm. Then she purchased 20 adjacent acres

with a cabin on it. Then a mobile home was donated.

"Our first family came in, and we sort of grew from there," she said. It was the beginning of Ruby's Safe Haven, named for Judy's mother.

Last year, Ruby's Safe Haven hosted 48 families, which included 26 children. Typically, the farm has one to six visitors at a time, but there have been as many as 20. On average, a woman or family stays no more than three months.

"My job is to bring them in, get 'em safe and give them time to find a solution or at least a next step," explained Judy. "We find family or friends they can go to, find jobs, help them get an apartment. Sometimes it's a homeless shelter or rehab. We help them go back to school. Whatever seems right.

"I had a lady here who had been staying with her five kids in a car in the summertime, bathing her kids in a lake. ... Sometimes they just can't figure out what to do next because they don't have time to do anything but worry about survival from one moment to the next. But when they get here, it's like a retreat. They can breathe. They can think."

When Judy takes someone in — either through referral from the hospital, the sheriff's department, the HELP Center or elsewhere — she assesses their needs as quick-



*Nikki Etheridge, Judy's granddaughter, is a wiz on the loom and "the number-one hand" on the farm.*



ly as possible, gives them a day or two to "let them lay," and then involves them in the running of the farm.


That's where Judy's "Little House on the Prairie" skills are shared with her visitors. In a studio room she calls the school house, baskets of fluffy wool lay about waiting to be cleaned, combed or spun. There are spinning wheels, looms, balls of yarn, knitting needles and a rack full of finished shawls and scarves spread throughout the room.

Women also work in the herb garden or help with the livestock or the wash.

"They can get in on it and do anything they want. It relaxes their mind so they aren't so frantic. Then we can talk and come up with a plan."

Judy has her own plans. Ruby's Safe Haven needs to expand its housing accommodations. Thanks to the labor of some gracious volunteers and donations from local businesses such as All-American Plumbing and Smith Lumber, a wonderful farmhouse is going up amongst the trees. When finished, it should accommodate 25 people.

"We've had awesome house parents who have moved on to new mission fields, so we're looking for a house mom. I don't know who it is yet, but God does," Judy said in that matter-of-fact way she has anytime she talks about God. For Judy, the whole thing is an act of faith. She takes no government or county money, relying totally on donations from individuals and churches. And, as a result, women and children get a chance to start over.

"We don't always have success, but we try," said Judy. "I often tell the women who come to me, 'God brought you here for a reason. Now who do you want to be?'" 

*If you would like to help mentor at Ruby's Safe Haven or provide monetary support, contact Judy Seaton at 903-216-4400 or email [aspinnerstale@aol.com](mailto:aspinnerstale@aol.com).*