Chickens for Change

A 4-year-old boy, his chickens, and his mission

By Hannah Miller

Erin Burke Edwards

"Even though there are days when we have to help, Ethan works hard and takes his fund-raising seriously. We're so proud of him!"

When Ethan Edwards holds a chicken's egg to his cheek, his whole face beams as only a 4-year-old's can. Then he kisses the egg gently, announcing, "I love chickens."

Those aren't any ordinary eggs, just as Ethan is no ordinary child. They're the dark reddish-brown, light green, tan and cream-colored eggs laid by the heritage-breed chickens on his family's Chickens for Change Farm outside Thomasville.

Ethan feeds nearly 40 chickens every day, plus a few ducks and turkeys. He also gathers the eggs every day. That's impressive for a 4-year-old. But it's even more impressive when you consider that Ethan has a skin condition that makes it difficult for him to go outside.

Ethan is unable to sweat, and his body, which can't regulate its temperature, is extremely vulnerable to heat and cold. If he's going to be outside more than a few minutes in summer, he suits up like an explorer heading for the Sahara, in a safari hat and a vest cooled by ice packs. They'll keep him comfortable for the time it takes to get his chores done, his mother says.

His genetically-caused condition is called ichthyosis. The proceeds he earns from selling the eggs goes to the research foundation trying to find a cure for ichthyosis.

Which came first?

Outside on a recent day, Ethan called: "Chickee! Chickee! Chickee!" Then "Elevator! I want Elevator!"

Ethan named the chicken because she leaves her eggs in high places. He's a great fan of the elevators at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, where he began treatment for his condition shortly after birth. He can tell you which floor each of his doctors is on. He was highly disappointed, his mother says, when his dermatologist moved to the first floor, cutting out an elevator ride.

Ethan and his 3-year-old sister, Emma, live with their parents, Chip and Erin Edwards, next door to Chip Edwards' parents on the family's 80-acre homeplace. Until last year, it had several gardens but no chickens.

Chickens for Change began when Ethan, then 3, was puzzled by a story that Erin read to him. In it, a chicken hatched from an egg, something amazing to a 3-year-old.

"It didn't make sense to him," his mother says. "He wanted to know how it was really done."

Since his parents are schoolteachers — Chip teaches math at Northwest Guilford High in Greensboro and Erin at one time taught English at North Davidson High in Lexington—the natural thing was to help Ethan find his own answer. They made an incubator out of a Styrofoam cooler, set a container of water in it for moisture and fitted it out with a light

bulb for warmth. They got a batch of heritage-breed eggs, cut an observation window in the Styrofoam, and set the whole thing on the kitchen counter.

Ethan tended the eggs, which had to be turned three times a day to prevent malformation of the chicks inside. And when 21 days were up, he remembers, "They pecked. Peck, peck."

And what did he get? "They were babies!"

Two baby roosters and two would-be hens emerged, to be coddled and cuddled by a child who must stay indoors most of the time. When the hens got to the point where they could lay their own eggs, those eggs became more chickens, which meant more eggs, more chickens, and so on. The hens hatched some of the eggs, and the family hatched others in a more professional incubator they bought.

"We couldn't get rid of the chickens," says Erin. "We enjoyed having them."

Along the way, they also acquired baby ducks and turkeys.

A normal life

Now, a wooden statue of a chicken stands in a corner of their living room, a gift to Erin from her husband. "He calls me the crazy chicken lady," she says. "He'll say that, but he'll go out there and talk to them."

When a fox got one of the chickens, Erin told the children what happened, "teaching them how to deal with death and loss."

The count now is 36 chickens, four ducks, one grown turkey and five baby turkeys, all with free range of the property. "Sometimes my father-in-law, who lives next door, gets upset when they get into his tomatoes," Erin says.

It was Ethan's idea to sell the eggs to benefit the Foundation for Ichthyosis and Related Skin Types. They charge $3 per dozen, and the 50 cents profit goes to help find a cure for the rare condition. His particular type occurs once in an estimated 200,000 births.

"He'll always have ichthyosis unless they come up with a cure later," Erin says. In the meantime, his parents encourage him to have as normal a life as possible.

As their mother is being interviewed, Ethan and Emma tussle over plastic boys they've scattered on the floor. At one point he tackles Emma, demanding "Give it back!"

He goes with his parents to Pilgrim Reform Church in Lexington, where they feel free to leave him in the nursery because everybody there knows him and his problems.

He'll head for kindergarten next year, carrying, along with a kindergartner's usual belongings, a set of instructions for his teacher. When he gets too hot, Erin says, "His face gets bright red," and she knows it's time to apply icepacks. His sensitive skin denies him that staple of childhood—Band-Aids.

People buy Ethan's eggs after hearing about them word-of-mouth or reading his Chickens for Change Farm Facebook page. They end up thinking, "He's pretty special," his mom says.

She thinks so, too. "He's just very easy going, probably because he's been through a lot," she says.

She's laid down one rule—no chickens in the house—and Ethan agrees with her. He has made a drawing modeled after the "No Smoking" signs that show a line drawn through a cigarette. His picture is a chicken, with a line through the middle. "I don't want chickens in my room," he explains.

This sign, he says, "will tell her, No!"

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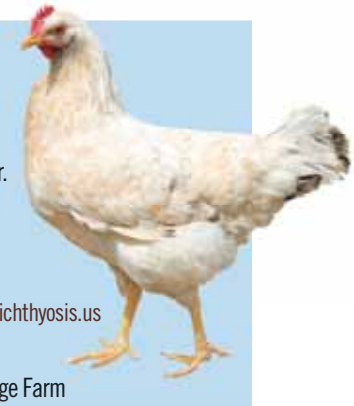
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