Up on the farm

Bruce McAllester, 57, was a city kid, growing up on Cleveland’s West Side.
After dropping out of Ohio State, he began drinking heavily and hanging out
on the streets. As life spiraled, he spent 20 years in and out of rehab — until he
arrived at Hopewell, a 300-acre working therapeutic farm in Mesopotamia, 50
miles east of Cleveland. After a year of treatment — which can include six hours
a day (or more) of farm work — McAllester was sober and ready for the world.
But he didn’t leave. Today, he works at Hopewell as program facilitator and head
of the farm crew. He recently took a break from helping residents harvest pota-
toes to chat with PDQ’s John Campanelli.

Bruce McAllester

How old were you when you
started drinking?
I’m not sure, like eighth grade.
But it didn’t become a problem
until I quit Ohio State.

How much were you drinking
back then?
The last six years before I got
here, it was like all day.

What would you usually drink?
Drugstore vodka, a lot of beer. I’d
go to the bar and drink a lot of
whiskey, whatever. Anything, Mad
Dog, you name it.

How many treatment programs
were you in?
I tried a lot of places, a lot. If I
was to sit down, I bet you I could
come up with 15. Some out of
state, Minnesota, Washington.

How long have you been sober?

What was it about Hopewell
that finally worked?
I think getting out of the city re-
ally, really helped. I was living at
150th and Puritas, and there
were bars at every corner. You
walk around, and all your friends
are drinking. So I definitely think
the change of environment helped
me. And the counselors here . . .
I don’t know why, if it was the
rural quality, it must have been
something. I just got straightened
out here. We have trails all over,
through the woods . . . It’s very
peaceful and healing.

What farm animals do the resi-
dents get to work with?
We have four horses, eight beef
cattle, six mom sheep that gave
birth to about 15 lambs. We have
60 Rhode Island Red hens getting
ready to start laying. We’ve got four
small pigs, two medium-size pigs
and two big sows that are getting
ready to give birth in a week or so.

What is it about the animals
that seems to help residents?
There must be something peace-
ful about it. We had a girl in over
the weekend. She’s just kind of
balked at the whole idea. She was
screaming and yelling. I don’t
know why that was. It could have
been the streets calling her . . .

She was screaming in the van as
it was going down to the horse
barn. When she went in there and
saw the animals, she immediately
walked up to a horse and started
talking to it. She calmed down.
There must be something about
caring for animals. Something
that’s inside us innately, I guess.

Do you still consider yourself
a city kid or are you a farmer
now?
I like the city. I still come up to
the House of Blues and go down
to the stadium and to Cavs games.
I love Cleveland.

And when you go to the sta-
dium or concerts and see all
these people drinking?
Yeah, that’s hard. I went to the
Willie Nelson/Bob Dylan con-
cert a couple weeks ago. A lot
of people were drinking. I just
made up my mind. I decided that
I wouldn’t know what it’s like to
quit unless I just do it and never
go back. I just made up my mind:
This is what I’m going to do.

Where would you be today
without this place?
I just thought the way I was going,
I could probably live for five more
years, going through the shifts in
the mornings and the middle of
the night and partying hard with
the guys in the neighborhood.

That was more than six years
ago. Yeah, I figure I wouldn’t be alive.

For more information on
Hopewell, which specializes in
treating people suffering from
schizophrenia, bipolar disor-
der or major depression, visit
Hopewell.org or call 440-693-4074.