THE BALTIMORE BANNER

The goats are baa-ack at Towson University

Ellie Wolfe

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Joseph, an Alpine goat from Harmony Church Farm in Harford County, eats invasive Multiflora rose in the Glen Arboretum at Towson University. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

The small herd decimates invasive vines that choke a campus forest

Jack, Charlie and Elvis stood unfazed by the gaggle of girls cheering loudly and waving their hands. One of their adoring fans, reaching out over the fence, tried to get hold of Jack, but he slipped through her fingertips farther from the small crowd that had formed around him.

No, they aren't the next big boy band sweeping the nation and breaking hearts. They're alpine and Nubian goats.

Brought in by Towson University to munch on the invasive plants in the Glen Arboretum, the goats are now part of a tradition that's been taking place for over 10 years. From Harmony Church Farm in Harford County, Jack, Charlie and Elvis were joined in their quest to rid the arboretum of invasive species by three other crowd pleasers: Lucy, Joseph and Petie.

"People walk through and see green, and they think green is good," said Roni Casilly, head goat herder at Harmony Church Farm. "But not all green is good."

That's where the goats come in. They eat the invasive species, usually vines, that can easily overtake green spaces like the Glen Arboretum, 10 acres of woods on the Towson campus used for scientific research, classes and socializing.

On their recent visit to campus, the goats ate privet hedge, honeysuckle and Asian bittersweet, all invasive plants that damage the arboretum.

If the university doesn't get rid of the invasive plants in the arboretum, said Cassilly, the "entire ecosystem just collapses."

Goats from Harmony Church Farm have been visiting the university to help with the invasive plants for the past 11 years. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

Camille Denard, a biology student, gets a nod of approval as she rubs Jack's back in the Glen Arboretum. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

In the 10 years since they've been coming to Towson, the goats have made a big difference in the landscape, Cassilly said.

Most of the space used to be covered in vines and impossible to navigate, Cassilly said. But on the day of the goat visit, students were promoting sustainable causes and giving away plants to students in the area that used to be engulfed in invasive species.

"If you were to stand here in the Glen and look up, you could not see any of the sky because the vibes had covered all of those trees," Cassilly said, standing in a small grassy glade. "Without our goats, none of us would be standing in this beautiful woods right now, because there wouldn't be any trees left."

Chloe Romm, a junior at Towson who was talking to other students about sustainability, said this was the first time she's worked with the goats.

"Sometimes when you work with goats, they can eat plants that are native and that are good for the environment," Romm said. "I appreciate that they were very carefully placed in an area with a lot of invasive plants, so that's what they're focusing on."

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Joseph enjoys an invasive Multiflora rose snack. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

The goats, she said are a "really cool way to get rid of some of the invasives and raise awareness."

Dozens of college students streamed in and out of the arboretum on their way to and from class, some picking up samplings of Grevillea shrubs from Romm's table.

Just as the goats weren't fazed by their popularity with students, none of them seemed particularly bothered when another special guest showed up:

Towson University President Mark Ginsberg.

“Having goats on our campus, preserving the natural beauty of our campus, is a great thing to do for our students, our community and for Towson University,” Ginsberg said, standing in front of the goat enclosure as Jack chewed steadily on the vines behind him. “I’m having quite a good time with them myself.”

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The university president said that, growing up, his family owned a farm, so he “respects all members of the kingdom of earth.”

Roni Cassily, left, owner of Harmony Church Farm, talks with students as her goats graze. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

The goats are fairly socialized, since they’re often brought to different areas to eat invasive species as an alternative to using heavy machinery to clear out land. Cassilly has taken the goats to Baltimore’s Barbara and Parkwood Park, Rockfield Park in Harford County and private residences.

Veronica Black, a junior from Maryland who stopped by for a study break, said this was the first time she's ever seen a goat up close.

"Their hair is coarser than I thought," she said, after petting Petie, a small calico-colored goat. "They're really cute, though."

About the Education Hub

This reporting is part of The Banner's Education Hub, community-funded journalism that provides parents with resources they need to make decisions about how their children learn. Read more.

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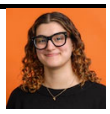

Ellie Wolfe reports on higher education at the Baltimore Banner. Raised in western Massachusetts and a proud graduate of Bates College, Ellie spent a year reporting on higher education at the Arizona Daily Star in Tucson before moving to Baltimore.

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