

Past Lives

Trading Life in the Limelight for Quieter Times With Alpacas

By Cindy Lavan. Illustration by Nina Whyte

As any alpaca owner knows, each alpaca is diverse – a unique entity unto itself. So, too, are we, their owners. One typical question we receive from farm visitors is “Who buys alpacas?” What a simple, yet loaded question that is. Over the years, we have seen alpaca owners ranging from young singles to young families to older singles and older families. In searching the alpaca herds of our country, I have stumbled across a few herds that have unique owners. These owners have held or currently hold very unique lifestyle and professional occupations worthy of a note or two.

We contacted a few alpaca owners we found who have had or hold interesting lifestyle positions. Below are the set of questions we asked, and what follows are excerpts of their responses.

The questions were:

- Describe your current/past unique occupation. Include number of years in that industry, rank, successes, etc.

- Describe the reason for incorporating alpacas into your lifestyle.
- What correlations do you see between your past/current occupation and the business aspects of the alpaca industry?
- What are your goals for your alpaca business/lifestyle?
- With any occupation come stresses. Do you feel these have been mini-

mized/about the same/or maximized by owning livestock?

- Most importantly, what do your former colleagues say about your lifestyle change?
- Family support is key in any occupation. How has the alpaca lifestyle affected your family situation?
- Finally... if you could do it again (that is, change your lifestyle to incorporate alpacas), would you?

From the Track to the Toenail Trims

What do you get when you mix a jockey with alpacas? A person who wants to ride them but can't. Jeff Anderson was a ribbon-placing jockey for over 20 years before turning in his stirrups for a set of shears.

“The day after I graduated from high school, I headed for the racetrack to find work and train to be a jockey. Where I ended up was a ranch in Ontario, California breaking young horses with 20 other kids for \$40 a month plus room and board. We broke over two thousand horses that year and sent them to the races. If you survived “training camp,” then you would go to the track and learn how to ride track style. Once at the track, you were evaluated on your abilities and stature. The

ones who could make weight (that is, didn't weigh too much) moved on and the ones that could not remained exercise riders or grooms. I spent 20 years riding races all over the country from New York to California, from Chicago to New Orleans and Miami. I have ridden over 25,000 races in my career. I loved my work, probably would have done it for nothing, but I was paid very well. At the age of 38, I retired and moved back to my roots here in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to a piece of land I bought early in my career. I met my wife, Jenny, in 1991, and two months later we were married. I have three children – two boys, 10 and 8 – and one princess, age 7. I will turn 58 years old on my next birthday. Some people might say I did it backwards, but you see I was so busy making a living I didn't have a life. This way I go to sleep with my family and I wake up with them. And spend the days with them.

With so much land and living in the country, we decided to get into the livestock business. One of our criteria was that the animals had to be child-safe. That leaves out a lot of animals. We feel that the farming lifestyle is beneficial to children, as it teaches them to care for the animals' needs, not just their own. My wife had seen an advertisement for alpacas and it included a picture of a cria. We fell in love with them immediately but it took me two years to get over the sticker price by visiting many farms and seeing who was raising these critters. Professional people were. Lawyers, doctors, vets, CPAs, but not one was a traditional farmer. That sold me. We took the plunge, bought eight females and a couple of junior herd sires. That was six years ago and we have not regretted one single day. The alpacas have given us much joy.

One thing that I took out of my years as a jockey was the care the thoroughbred race horse gets on the track and off. I apply that knowledge and the husbandry practices I learned at the racetrack to raising and breeding alpacas. For instance, do not cut corners on good, clean water and properly-

made hay. I constantly check their feces for parasites and catch any problems early on. In breeding, my goals are to improve the quality and consistency of the fleece. We check our whole herd's fleeces every year to see where we are and analyze from the previous year. That way we know if we are on the right track or where we have to make

changes. Like the thoroughbred industry, to get that Derby winner, you need to breed the best to the best and hope for the best.

In a nutshell, I am so thankful that alpacas are in our life. The birth of a new cria is a miracle that you just have to witness to know that yes, this is worth our time and efforts." *(continued)*



Trading in his one-horsepower steed for a model with about 200 times the horsepower was a no-brainer for former jockey Jeff Anderson. But more importantly, Jeff traded in his highly-competitive racetrack career for a more family-oriented lifestyle raising alpacas in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.



From Leather Pants to Lead Ropes

Who says life isn't a party? A party of alpacas that is. Pat Badger went from 80's parties, concerts, and gold albums to manure shoveler and alpaca breeder without missing a beat.

"I was the bassist for the rock band Extreme. We recorded four albums/CDs for A&M Records from 1989 through 1995, had two top ten hits (including the #1 acoustic ballad "More Than Words"), sold over 6 million records worldwide, toured the world, and played shows and festivals with Aerosmith, Bon Jovi, Metallica, Guns 'n' Roses, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, members of Queen, Van Halen, The Who, and Led Zeppelin. We had videos on MTV and VH-1 and were recently featured on VH-1's "Bands Reunited," which included a farm tour of my farm, and gave me a chance to show off my alpacas."

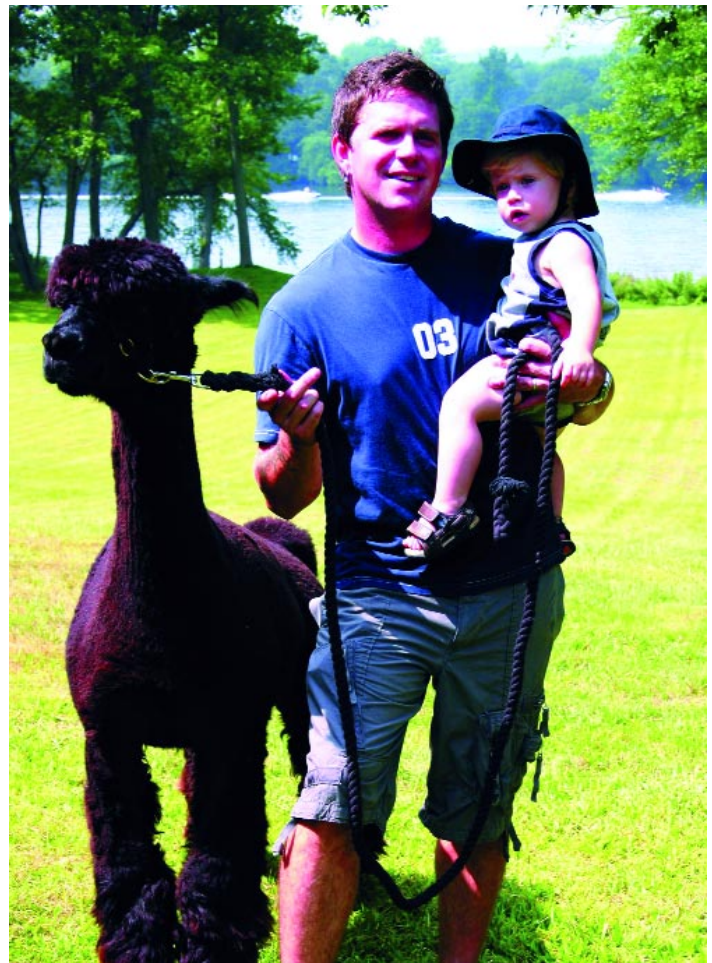
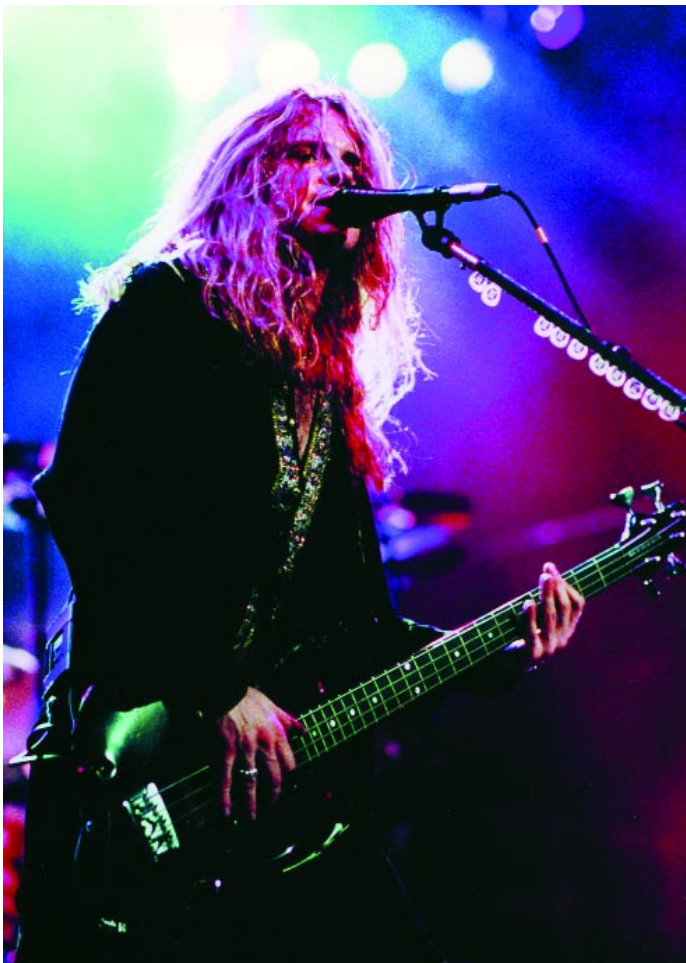
After Extreme split up in 1996, Pat was looking for a career change. He had played in a couple of bands since then, but never reached the level of success that Extreme had. That, coupled with the poor state of the music industry and declining record sales in general, led him to look for another career path. With the arrival of his first son, Aidan, the idea of touring and being absent from his family for months at a time had further distanced him from his music career.

"My wife, Donna, and I had bought a small farm in Massachusetts 11 years ago. The previous owners had built a barn for their horses, so we were all set up to raise some kind of livestock. We never knew what kind of livestock, exactly, until I saw the "I Love Alpacas" ad on CNBC. I started researching alpacas on the Internet and immediately started visiting farms in the area. We instantly fell for them. Always

having had a love for animals and the time, energy, and the farm to support this kind of venture, it all just fell into place."

Pat adds that there are certainly aspects of the show season that are similar to touring with a band. There is the preparation involved with going to a show and the set up when you get there after many miles of traveling. Then there is the anticipation and the pre-show jitters that accompany your first step onto the into the show ring.

"Our goal has been to assemble a herd of 30 to 40 high-quality huacayas in a variety of colors. We strongly focus on improving fiber production by combining the finest genetics available from the top herd sires in the country and by acquiring proven foundation females that have produced award-winning offspring. We also set out to find our own herd sires that would really make an impact on our breeding



Rock star or alpaca breeder? How about both? Pat Badger, former bassist for the rock band *Extreme*, traded the glittering lights of the stage for the green grass of the pastures. Perhaps touring with an alpaca rock band is in his future?



program. We have made great strides toward the future of our breeding program, and are fully committed to the alpaca industry. We plan on enjoying a long career of raising, breeding, and showing healthy and happy alpacas for our own enjoyment and for our clients as well. The financial rewards and tax advantages aren't bad either!"

Pat relates that most of his occupational stresses have been minimized by leaving the music business. Now, instead of having three other partners to contend with and other people making career decisions on his behalf, he is now his own boss and feels much more in control of his family's future. The alpaca industry is expanding and shows no signs of slowing down while the music business is in a state of contraction due mainly to online downloading and piracy of recorded music.

"Of course the lifestyle of being in a band was fun and exciting in my twenties, but the alpaca lifestyle is much more suited for where I'm at now. I still have fun traveling to shows, auctions, and conferences and have met some really cool people and made some really good friends in the process. Of course, there are challenges and stresses associated with any occupation, but the new ones [in the alpaca industry] are so different. As I'm sure most alpaca farmers can attest, some people look at you as though you have two heads while others are green with envy and can't believe that such a fun and rewarding home-based business is even possible!"

"My wife has always been supportive of whatever I've done. Her main focus has been our baby and hasn't had much involvement with the alpaca business yet since he is still in diapers and just learning how to walk. She wants to be more involved but just can't right now. We are much happier now that I'm not traveling all the time. It is giving me the opportunity to have a lot more time with my son, as well. He comes out every morning with me in a backpack to do chores and he loves it! My parents are involved too. In fact, they co-own some animals with us. My only regret is that I didn't start sooner. I feel



Bill Schneider has engaged in extraordinary post-military careers in politics and law. This decorated officer and former Green Beret enjoys wide respect as the Assistant United States Attorney and Anti-Terrorism Coordinator for Maine's Department of Justice. But it's Bill's "other" career that he finds equally enjoyable and rewarding: that of Alpaca Breeder.



like I've really found what I was looking for in every aspect of the alpaca business. It has already been rewarding in so many ways. I also wish I had sold some of my high flying tech stocks in the late nineties and bought alpacas!"

From Green Beret to Breeder

Alpaca breeder Bill Schneider has had a widely varied and interesting career prior to becoming an alpaca breeder.

In 1981, Bill graduated from the

United States Military Academy at West Point with a degree in Engineering and Computer Science. While there, he was Captain of the Varsity Rifle Team and selected as an All-American shooter and invited to compete in the Olympic Trials in Shooting. Following graduation, Bill served in the U.S. Army Special Forces (Airborne) most of the time. This was as a Green Beret Team Leader, jumping out of airplanes, riding on fast boats, running around the world, etc. In 1986, he was medically

retired due to a Service-connected disability. Following his military career, Bill worked as a contractor for the Department of Defense before returning to school to earn a law degree.

By 1993, his career as an attorney paid dividends when he was appointed as the Assistant Attorney General to the State of Maine, specializing in drug trafficking felonies. By 1998, Bill had been elected to the Maine House of Representatives, eventually being appointed as the Republican Whip. Today, Bill serves as the Assistant United States Attorney and Anti-Terrorism Coordinator for the Department of Justice in Maine.

Says Bill: "I raise alpacas for a number of reasons. I love animals, as do my wife and daughter. I've lived on a fairly big farm for the last 15 years, and have always felt a desire to "put the farm to work" and return it to a traditional agricultural pursuit. I really like alpacas, having attended shows and admired them for the last 10 years. Their relatively small size and gentle disposition also makes them easier to work with for me, as I use a wheelchair. I also like the entrepreneurial challenge of starting a business to breed alpacas and harvest their fleece, which will hopefully be lucrative enough to supplement my retirement in a few years.

My goals in the alpaca business are both personal and professional. Professionally, I would like to breed the highest quality alpacas, with outstanding conformation, and fleece quality and quantity. I would like my daughter to grow up around alpacas, and to play a role in their care. It also feels good to have my farm active and productive.

The routine of raising alpacas fits very nicely with my family's lifestyle. The only additional stress is the limitation on going away on a trip for a couple of days as a family, and having to find substitute care for the alpacas.

I keep a photo of my three alpacas prominently displayed in my office (it's a pretty funny photo) to spark a little bit of discussion. My colleagues often react to my alpaca stories with a combination of amazement and curiosity."

Continues Bill: "My family loves our alpaca business! My eight-year-old daughter is a full partner in caring for them. She has shown a lot of initiative and responsibility in taking care of the animals. My wife loves the fleece end of the business, having knitted and worked with fiber throughout her entire life. For me, the fact that I use a wheelchair has posed some challenges, but with plenty of help from the family and some forethought in how I set up the barn (which is almost 200 years old) and pastures, we're making it work. If I had it all to do again, I absolutely would! The alpaca business is a part of our family now, and we all love it!"

From Mayor and Manager to Manager and Breeder

"Vote for me and we'll have alpacas in everyone's fields." While not a great campaign platform for a major metropolitan city, the former Mayor of Cleveland, Michael White and his wife, JoAnn, a former public official herself, have traded in the campaign trail for the horse and alpaca trails of life.

Michael has been in public service for over 27 years. He served as a Cleveland City Council Member from 1978-1984. He then served as an Ohio State Senator from 1984-1989. He served as Mayor of the City of Cleveland from 1989 to 2002. He was the second African American to hold that office and he was the longest serving Mayor in the city's history, but retired from public service in 2002 to become an alpaca farmer. In addition, he is completing a Fellowship, funded by three major Cleveland area foundations, where he works with several colleges and universities in the State of Ohio. In his "spare" time, he serves as Chairman of the Board of the Seven Pines Foundation – the foundation rescues abused and neglected horses, brings them back to health and soundness and then donates the horses to therapeutic riding programs and other nonprofit organizations like a YMCA camp.

JoAnn was in public service for eight years, serving as President of Lakewood

City Council. Lakewood is considered an inner ring suburb of Cleveland. She retired from office in 1998. Over the last 25 years, she has served in leadership capacities in a variety of Cleveland-based nonprofit organizations. She joins her husband as an alpaca farmer and also runs a consulting company, Glengarry Consulting Inc. Glengarry provides management support to a variety of nonprofits in the Greater Cleveland area. She also provides management support and the daily care and well being of the horses in Seven Pines Foundation.

"In 1998, we purchased 47 acres of property in the rolling hills of southern Ohio as a way to 'escape' to the country on the weekends. It was former farmlands that we slowly built into an oasis of beauty and serenity. When Michael retired in 2002, we decided to move permanently to the farm – but what would we do on the farm? Michael read an article about alpacas on an airline trip in Continental Airlines' in-flight magazine. He became curious and we researched the alpaca industry for about two years before deciding that it would become our retirement venture. We wanted to make good use of our land, get involved in livestock that we wouldn't have to slaughter, and bring joy to others and ourselves. Without a doubt, the alpaca industry was for us."

JoAnn and Michael see several correlations between their past occupations and the alpaca business. "We consider ourselves fairly adept at marketing and public relations – after all, it takes considerable skill to sell yourself to an electorate. We apply those same principles to selling our alpacas to prospective buyers. Sound, consistent, and outstanding customer service is what we provided our constituents and it is what we provide our alpaca customers. Secondly, we pride ourselves on organizational development and management. It is no easy task to run a city for 500,000 people or lead a suburb of 60,000 people. Paying attention to details and developing standard protocols and procedures has served us well

After a lifetime of public service that culminated in a distinguished career as the longest-serving mayor in Cleveland's history, His Honor Michael White now enjoys a more pastoral life far from the limelight.



Photos courtesy Cleveland Clinic Foundation

During a recent campaign swing through the so-called "Barnyard District," politician Michael White pledges better feed, larger stalls, and universal vet care to residents.



in each industry. Thirdly, you must have the capacity to reach out to others. No one governs people in a vacuum – outreach in public service is critical. We apply that same thinking to the alpaca industry. We are constantly in contact with fellow breeders, asking advice and guidance. Recently, we received a phone call at 10:00 p.m., from an Arizona breeder, whose husband was transporting alpacas from the West. Her husband was at an Ohio truck stop and ill. Michael drove to the meet the fellow alpaca breeder and took him to the hospital. He was treated and released and went on his way. Our ability to “give back” in this instance is a great example of the kind and caring outreach found among alpaca farmers.”

“Finally, each of us is a risk-taker. No one puts themselves up as a candidate for office without believing in oneself, being willing to lead, and knowing how to take reasonable risks. In the alpaca industry, one can succeed or fail - it is people-dependent and we believe that we can succeed in this industry!”

The Whites’ goal is quite simple: “provide quality alpacas, lovingly cared for.” They have a herd of 24 alpacas – each with different personalities and qualities. They plan to find each one a new home, where they will be lovingly cared for.

Adds Michael: “The stress of owning alpacas in no way compares to the stress of running major cities. It is a different type of stress. Our stress

comes from learning a new business. The learning curve is often quite high, but we reach out and we do the necessary research.”

The alpaca lifestyle has been great for the White family. They have four children ranging from 11 years old to 28. Each family member participates in various aspects of the family farm. “We have a large family who loves to come and visit and experience the country and be with our alpacas and horses,” quips JoAnn. “For special projects, like preparing our fiber for shipment to the AFCNA co-op, even my 74-year-old mother comes down and helps.”

Michael reflects, “We have asked ourselves if the alpaca lifestyle has been right for us. The answer is always a resounding ‘yes!’ The investment of time and money, for us, is well worth it. Alpacas are wonderful creatures. They each have a different personality and in many ways, they have become our children. We celebrate their birth, we feed them when they are hungry (which is always), we provide them with a safe and clean environment, we nurse them when they are ill, we (attempt) to train them with good ground manners, and we cry when they leave us. It is a blessing to be able to provide love and care to our animals.”

From these few breeders whom I have interviewed, alpaca owners are as diverse as the alpacas themselves. I am sure I have missed many others with equally interesting past and present occupations, but the point is that no matter what your background, alpaca ownership can provide a very interesting and viable follow-on career for most people. And no matter what your background, there are skill-sets learned from past experiences that can be applied to running a successful alpaca business.

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