

Alpaca Angels:

HOW ALPACAS PROVIDE NEW PURPOSE FOR A SPECIAL GROUP OF FARMERS

This is the story of how the patriarch of a herd of alpacas—a king with a white crown, no less—moved to Safe Haven Farms, a community for adults with autism, and replaced his crown with a halo. The story starts like this...

Julie Bodette of Swanton, Ohio, stumbled into the alpaca business in 1998. A graphic designer who planned on raising horses on her five-acre farm, Julie found her plans turned upside down when she met with a client who needed a logo for her alpaca farm. One visit to the client's farm and Julie fell head over heels for alpacas. The horses never materialized. Julie currently owns a herd of 23 alpacas, and also boards her sister's four alpacas at Sunny Meade Alpacas.

Julie's sister, Kimberly Buechner Fouse, owns Alpacas of the Covenant located in Cold Spring, Kentucky. While their breeding businesses are separate, the sisters own a third business together, All Things Alpaca, LLC, originator and distributor of the Alpaca Fleece-Filled Bird Nesting Ball (patent pending).

The sisters share a mission: to make a difference in people's lives. Their goals are to give back to the community, share the abundance, and to help people grow as individuals, as well as helping them prosper in their businesses.

Julie's alpaca farm is located just down the road from Bittersweet Farms, one of the first farms for adults with autism in the United States. Bittersweet's mission is "to positively impact the lives of individuals with autism and those whose lives they touch."

This was Julie's first introduction to autism and farming, and it piqued her curiosity. She became interested in this neurological condition from a personal standpoint when a neighbor on the autism spectrum came to visit her farm. She saw, firsthand, the intuitive spark between the alpacas and this young man. She began looking for ways to use her herd to make a difference in the lives of those who live with this condition.

Autism is a complex neurological disorder with no known cause or cure. There is a wide range of disability along the autism spectrum, ranging from severe to very mild. One out of 88 American children is now diagnosed with autism. When these children graduate from high school, services are woefully inadequate. Many remain living in their parents' homes, unemployed and isolated.

In 2010, Safe Haven Farms was established by a group of parents in response to the lack of residential and vocational services for their adult children with autism. Bittersweet Farms, down the road from Julie, served as their model.

BY KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDOC



Farmer Jim serves grain to one of the alpacas at Safe Haven Farms.



Photo courtesy of the author

Farmer Jim and Julie introduce Dexter to his new home and vocation at Safe Haven Farms.

Located on a sixty-acre horse farm in southwest Ohio, Safe Haven Farms provides a variety of meaningful living, working, learning and leisure activities in a safe and accepting farm environment, where every individual is respected as a valued and contributing community member.

Kimberly, through her work with nonprofits in Cincinnati, heard about Safe Haven Farms. A few phone calls were made and contacts were established. Julie and Kimberly found that Safe Haven's mission dovetailed nicely with their mission of making a difference in people's lives. A new partnership was formed and cemented with a donation of four alpacas from Julie's herd. Ray, Lucado, Starbuck and Otis joined the Safe Haven family in June of 2010, at the same time that many of the new "farmers" were moving onto the farm.

Excitement abounded as the brand-new farmers got to know these fluffy newcomers with the big eyes and curious natures. Safe Haven staff soon found that a walk in the pasture with the alpacas had an immediate calming effect when the farmers were struggling with anxiety or behaviors. One farmer who is non-verbal

has been known to drag a chair into the middle of the pasture and sit, waiting for the alpacas to approach. No words needed! It's a beautiful sight for the staff, all of whom work hard to facilitate a sense of peace and calm for Safe Haven's farmers.

"I missed my boys after they moved," Julie said, "but they've gone to a wonderful place with more pasture to roam, and can interact with fifteen farmers. What a place to retire! And at Safe Haven, they have much more of a purpose. You can't put a monetary value on making someone smile, or putting a young man or woman with autism at ease."

Which brings us back to Dexter, the patriarch with the bearing of a king. Dexter is getting up there in years. He was the first male purchased as a herdsire for at Julie's farm, and she has many fond memories of him.

"He had quite a presence; a regal bearing, really," Julie said. "And he has this white top-knot that looks like a crown. People who visited my farm were always attracted to Dexter because of his stature. But he was getting older, and Safe Haven came to mind. He's the sire of the alpacas who already live there, so it seemed the perfect fit."



Audrey, a Safe Haven Farmer, works on a nesting ball. Making the Nesting Balls provides a measurable end result, which has been found to have a positive impact for people on the autism spectrum.

“I didn’t want to send him down alone,” Julie explained, “so I thought about sending G as well. G was the first baby born on my farm, born to my first female, Amber. G’s full name is Midnight’s Royal Grand Marnier. But it turned out the fancy name didn’t fit his personality. I call him my little rapper—he hops and jumps when you bring his food—he’s quite the character. So we shortened his name to G, which fits him just fine.”

In the fall of 2012, Julie called Safe Haven to see if they’d like two more alpacas to join the four boys on site. Denny Rogers, founder and president of the Safe Haven board, said yes without hesitation.

Julie’s alpacas serve an even greater purpose than that of companions at Safe Haven Farms. Their fleece is being used to create the Alpaca Fleece-filled Bird Nesting Balls.

After shearing each spring, there are always seconds left over—fiber from the upper leg, neck, hip, and shoulder. One eventful shearing day Julie watched bird after bird fly off with the fleece that lined the driveway. Nesting material! Her creative juices started flowing.



They’re the perfect ‘green’ earth-friendly product, and birds love them. Safe Haven Farms hopes to expand production of the Nesting Balls, and sell them at farmers markets as well as bird supply stores.

She imagined a ball about the size of a softball, made out of grapevine and jute. In her mind’s eye, she imagined winding several colors of huacaya (and suri) fiber into and around the ball, finishing it off with a jute rope for hanging. She knew birds would flock to the balls in spring and summer for nesting material.

“We were looking for a way to diversify our livestock businesses,” sister Kimberly told me over coffee, “and this was perfect. They’re the perfect ‘green’ earth-friendly product. They’re biodegradable. They have no smell and blend in with the environment, so they don’t draw predators to the birds’ nests. The hollow fiber doesn’t retain moisture; it fluffs up again after it rains. The lightweight, insulating fiber keeps the baby birds warm on those early spring nights, which can be very cold and life-threatening for the nestlings. The birds actually play on the balls. Chickadees, titmice, and gold finches, in particular, love them!”

Not only do the birds love them—birders love them as well. The Alpaca Fleece-filled Bird Nesting Ball has garnered awards and rave reviews in several birding and alpaca periodicals and are now sold throughout the United States and Canada.



Photo courtesy of the author

A schedule is posted in the barn to help Safe Haven Farmers, breaking down the tasks involved in feeding and watering the alpacas. This method of teaching is often used with people with autism.

The farmers of Safe Haven have joined artisans from the Epilepsy Foundation of Greater Cincinnati and the Epilepsy Center of Northwest Ohio to make these bird-pleasing products. When Safe Haven’s alpacas are sheared in the spring, the seconds are gathered as Nesting Ball material. The activity of making the Nesting Balls provides a measurable end result, which has been found to improve behaviors, increase focus, help develop motor skills, and serve as a creative outlet for people on the autism spectrum. This perfectly matches Safe Haven’s mission of providing meaningful work for its farmers. It is hoped that enough of the Alpaca Fleece-filled Bird Nesting Balls will be generated that the farmers of Safe Haven will be able to sell them during the summer at area farmers’ markets. This venture would increase both socialization and confidence in the public arena.

Julie has plans for building deeper relationships between the farmers of Safe Haven and the six alpacas that now graze and romp in the pastures behind the newly refurbished barn.

“I want to help find a volunteer, maybe from an FFA school program, to come over and help the farmers learn how to handle the alpacas’ simple tasks like how to put on halters and walk them. And when

the farmers get used to that, they could think about entering shows and participating in obstacle course competitions. It would be so good for the farmers—a real self-esteem builder,” Julie said.

The day Dexter and G were delivered to Safe Haven, Julie posted a picture of their arrival on Facebook.

“Someone commented that Dexter looked like an angel with a halo,” she said. “Think of that. He left my farm, where he was a king with a crown, and entered the barn at Safe Haven, decked out as an angel. That’s pretty cool, isn’t it? Dexter has a whole new job now. All my boys do. That makes me feel really good.”

Kathleen Deyer Bolduc’s books include *Autism and Alleluias* (Judson Press, 2010); *A Place Called Acceptance: Ministry with Families of Children with Disabilities* (Bridge Resources, Louisville, KY, 2001); and *His Name is Joel: Searching for God in a Son’s Disability* (Bridge Resources, Louisville, KY, 1999). She is hard at work on a new book for Judson Press. A spiritual director and retreat leader, she and her husband own a retreat center near Oxford, Ohio, where one of these days they may raise alpacas. Her son, Joel, is one of the 15 farmers now residing at Safe Haven Farms. She can be reached at www.kathleenbolduc.com.