

## Born in the Wrong Place

I have always said I was born in the wrong place. I was born in the city with a heart for the country. I spent the middle years of my life edging towards that dream. My husband Al and I found ourselves, at my insistence, living on 35 acres of rough, spectacular mountain property in the Sangre de Cristo mountains in Southern Colorado. Al built our dream home there, but what to do with the other 34 acres? In many discussions I had told Al, "I should have been born on a farm." We had seen an article about alpacas and thought, "What a perfect environment for them. It might work!"

Because of a love of animals I spent over half of my working life working for veterinarians in some capacity or another from surgical assistant to business manager. I did a lot of research into care of alpacas and felt that I might just have enough knowledge to care for livestock and run a business. It was a scary step. So I prayed for a sign...

It was May of 1999, and we decided to raft the Green River one more time before settling down to be homebound with a herd. We came off the river late in the day and found a hotel to spend the night. When I flopped down on the first bed I had slept on in days, I started to giggle. The ceiling was covered with alpacas! The pattern troweled into the ceiling looked like thousands of alpacas. MY SIGN!!!

Al said, "You always wanted to be a farmer, now be a farmer!" We went home and designed a barn that would grow with us and planned some fencing to keep our herd safe. We then stepped into the wonderful world of alpacas. Through research I had decided to start my herd with daughters of the top herd sires in the country if I could get them. Back in 1999 the selection was small and farmers did not part with their good stock but I found two pregnant females and a young male. Over the next couple of years I found a few more females from the specific lines I wanted. I did some selective outside breeding and grew my herd. I brokered for other breeders through those years to keep money flowing to pay for farm expenses. My patient husband drove our show string and me all over the country to shows. His flexibility as a contractor gave him the ability to get away for shows. After some pushing I finally got him into the show ring himself. He loved it.

I needed an impressive herd sire. I made the decision to send my lovely Legacy daughter Tapioca to breed with a young upstart named El Nino. I

had bought Tapioca because of the wonderful brightness in her fleece but she needed density and a more defined crimp. I prayed for a male from that union. I wrote a poem and had him named before he was even born.

MAKULU!!!

We had always done well in the show ring but look out for us now. I had a pinto Altair son named Moko, and of course I got my white El Nino son Makulu. They were just a pair of juveniles but they were also a pair of hams and loved to show off in the show ring. We racked up championships and reserves wherever we went with those boys. I also got an appreciation for the elite fine white fleeces, and suddenly every alpaca I touched I weighed against Makulu. That is where I want my entire herd to be. Over the next few years I slowly eliminated the dark animals from my herd and added only light ones from specific bloodlines that could compliment Makulu. He continued to rack up championships and rave reviews from judges into his fifth year. Al's failing health had us moving out of the mountains to East Texas. My youngest son Scott came to help with the farm as we had expanded our herd to 30 something. We moved and rebuilt the farm from the ground up on a piece of land on a slight hill that had nothing but a house on it when we bought it.

Makulu is pretty well known for a male from a small farm in east Texas. His babies are doing him proud as many are themselves champions. We wait for each show season with excitement. Suddenly there is more than our crias to watch in the show ring; we have a vested interest in all those other crias on all the farms we seeded with our breeding stock.

WOW!! How did we get to this? Just 10 years and a lot of fun and good friendships with alpacas.

AM I A FARMER NOW?

Gail Van Staveren  
Escondido Alpacas

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