

ALPACA CULTURE

March 2018

A Hopeful Future

Meet the new generation of American alpaca

Open or Closed?

Perspectives on the future of the AOA registry



Meet the
New Generation of
American Alpaca

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

One of the best tests for an industry's health is to look at its young people. Are they active in the community? Are they engaged and committed? Is what they are doing lucrative? Are their ideas original and trail-blazing?

If you are talking about the alpaca industry, the answers to these questions are a resounding yes!

Alta Vida Alpacas/Alpaca Partners recently pointed out the importance of mentoring young people in the alpaca community to ensure a bright future. In the June 2017 issue of *Alpaca Culture*

Dan and Cari Corley said:

“Our industry is one generation away from stagnation or even worse, extinction. We are at a crossroads of unlimited potential versus irrelevance. Laws of supply and demand require sustainable supply to create a national need for our special fiber. We need more farms producing quality fiber and outstanding products. This will secure a profitable future for all dedicated growers and producers. It is incumbent upon the active grower to engage youth in the alpaca industry and be a voice for its progress and profitability.”

At *Alpaca Culture*, we couldn't agree more. The Alpaca Partners model makes a difference with very young people, generally students and pre-teens and teens.

Recently, Stacie Chavez of Sky Ridge Alpacas pointed out that she keeps noticing a small group of high achievers making a lot of difference in the alpaca community and shared their names with us.

Many of the respondents interviewed for this story questioned my initial contact to them saying, “I may have been young when we started out but now I'm not.” But this is not just about age.

It is about doing the alpaca business as your primary gig and being dedicated to its future and believing it can work. It's also about creativity and making something successful out of a combination of sheer will power and ingenuity. It is mustering the determination to take the alpaca industry to the next level. Also important is the fact that with fresh faces come new ways of doing things.

Best of all, major herds are not fire-selling but passing the torch to a new generation. They have big ideas, a lot of energy and a remarkable passion for alpacas.

Here are the profiles of outstanding people making a go of it in the alpaca industry.



COURTESY KARA MCELROY / BUCK BROOK ALPACAS

Dedicated to “selling the alpaca industry as a whole,” Kara McElroy believes in the uniqueness and quality of alpacas to take alpaca fiber to the mainstream.

Justin and Kara McElroy **Buck Brook Alpacas | Roscoe, New York**

How did you get into alpacas?

I got into alpacas by meeting other folks who were in the business and becoming quite fascinated with the facets of the business. We have always loved animals, but I liked that alpacas were not only breeding animals but offered an end-product as well.

What are your main goals?

Our main goals are to sell the alpaca industry as a whole. We emphasize to our customers that our goals are shared as a family. You have to work hard to sell animals, promote the fiber and sell alpacas as a lifestyle. We promote this by opening our farm as an agritourism business. Folks come visit the farm daily and they learn what it takes to be in the business. We want to promote the industry so it grows as whole and moves on from being a cottage industry to a mainstream and profitable American industry.

What is your model based on?

Our model is unique and has spawned out of the overwhelming response we have had to our farm. When we first embarked on the business we thought we would just be breeding and selling alpacas. We learned very quickly that there is so much more to it – we didn't expect

the overwhelming interest by others to learn about alpacas. Our model is based on four things: breeding and selling animals, fiber production and products, boarding of animals and agritourism. Those are the areas where we derive income.

What makes your project unique?

Our project is unique because alpacas within themselves are unique. They are docile animals and so beautiful to look at that they do a lot of their own marketing. The end product they produce is an easy sell because it is such high quality. Uniqueness and quality make it very easy to sell the alpaca lifestyle to others.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

It is my hope that the alpaca industry will become a more mainstream fiber industry that still puts a great value on the breeding and selling of alpacas with premier fiber.

Zachary and Jessica Hackett attend major shows such as the Futurity regularly and even met each other at Nationals.



COURTESY JESSICA HACKETT/HALO RANCH

Zachary and Jessica Hackett Halo Ranch | Wilsonville, Oregon

How did you get into alpacas?

My first experience with alpaca ranching was in 2007 when I started helping my dad on the ranch he had been working for, Wilkins Livestock Ranch, owned by Mike and Janet Wilkins in Geneva, Nebraska. While working alongside my dad, Steven Kramer, along with Mike and Janet, I gained experience in general herd health and basic alpaca husbandry. I have always had a love for animals but as I worked more with alpacas and llamas I grew to have a passion for them. My experience with alpacas was with the Suri breed, and to this day, they are still by far my favorite of the two breeds. Their elegance when in full fleece with their locks is so amazing. They have a regal look about them.

After the Wilkins retired, I started working for Park View All American Alpacas (PVA) working with their show crew and traveling the U.S. going from show to show. While working for PVA, I met my now husband of four years, Zachary Hackett, while at the Nationals show in Grand Island, Nebraska. Since then, alpaca ranching has become a family affair. My daughter Reagan has been around alpacas her entire life. 2018 marks the 11th year that I have been working with alpacas and my passion has only increased for these special animals and all that they have to offer.

What are your main goals?

One of our main goals as alpaca breeders is being one of the best alpaca ranches in the country. We would like to make a sustainable business as an alpaca ranch, being able to use every aspect of an alpaca. Our main focus is to breed, show, and sell animals, however, as we are growing as a business, we are focusing on the processing of alpaca fiber, selling the manure, and also developing an alpaca meat product. As a green livestock, it is important for us to inform our customers of the values and quality of the alpaca as a livestock animal. As younger alpaca breeders, informing people of the alpaca industry and working towards a better sustainable fleece product with the highest of qualities is important to us.

What is your model based on?

Our model is based on several different breeding strategies from a number of farms that I have had the honor of working with. We acquired one of the best Suri herds in the nation last year, Great Lakes Ranch, owned by Brad and Jandy Sprouse, and are working on continuing their legacy of producing high quality alpacas. We evaluate each dam prior to breeding based



Gabe and Jessica White wanted to get back to their farm roots and built their Suri farm on enhancing luster. Their long-standing relationship with the alpaca industry helps them form connections. Gabe works at another job outside the farm and Jessica does educational outreach. SARA MALETIS / SARA MALETIS PHOTOGRAPHY

on factors such as luster, density, conformation . . . all of the typical qualities, and then we see which one of our herdsires is going to increase the chances of that dam's offspring to have more of a certain quality or qualities.

What makes your project unique?

What makes us different from other breeders is that I have seen and worked for many of the top breeders in the industry and I am able to take all of those different models and views and turn them into our own business and breeding model. I was able to learn from what others have tried and may or may not have been successful in doing and can make sure to make or not make those decisions. We were also blessed in getting the opportunity to start near the top in terms of breeding for high quality. Not many breeders have had this opportunity and have had to spend years getting their herd to where they want it. For us, it has been a blessing and we are very grateful.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

As more people learn and are informed of the benefits and qualities of alpacas as an animal and as a business, I see the industry becoming more known

and prevalent. Just in this past year, we have seen new breeders enter the show rings and it is very exciting. New breeders are what makes it possible for us to do what we do and the more that all of us work together to get more folks interested in alpacas, the better off we will all be. We love alpacas, the alpaca industry, and all of the breeders throughout the U.S. We look forward to the future of the alpaca industry and what it has to hold.

Gabe and Jessica White Oregon Alpaca Farm | Oregon City, Oregon

How did you get into alpacas?

We sold our construction supply company in 2003 and wanted to get back to our roots with animals and the farm. We were both blessed to have grown up with livestock and understood the hard work and dedication it takes and wanted to get our hands dirty again. After consulting with Gabe's parents, Tim and Teresa Vincent, of Celebrity Alpaca Sales, we traveled the country visiting farms and breeders and fell in love with the Suris right away and knew that was the direction for us. We bought our foundation group in 2003 and continue to expand our quality and goals as Oregon Alpaca Farm.

What are your main goals?

We wanted to put our focus on one or two traits and the most important for us was *luster*. Over time we have found that the other aspects such as fineness and uniformity just follow. At Oregon Alpaca Farm, even after 15 years of breeding, we still keep that focus of improving individual traits and it has paid off and continues to pay off with three high selling Suri females in a row at Celebrity Sales Auctions. We continue to evolve with each generation of cria. Our goal is to solidify the fleece traits and produce consistent and high quality alpacas by dedication to the breed and careful planning on the matings. Recent fleece results with awards like “best luster” and high scores from senior judges have given us the confidence that we’re on the right track. Even skin biopsy tests from an acknowledged lab report uses phrases like “elite uniformity” and “best Suri set of numbers I have seen for fineness and uniformity.”

What is your model based on?

Our model is based on being a productive small farm. Gabe has a full time “nine to five” job and we both work the farm from scooping poo to “farm to table women’s luncheons” serving our home grown veggies, chicken and pork. We typically have a very select group of crias each year, which gives time us time to be there for customers. We don’t want to sell animals by the volume, we want to sell quality that lasts.

At Oregon Alpaca Farm, we are constantly looking at what not only the judges like but what the buyers want and what is selling. If you can’t sell your product in the end it doesn’t matter what you do. Quality is what people want and we let our animals speak for themselves.

What makes your project unique?

Oregon Alpaca Farm is unique not only in our extensive knowledge but also our long-term commitment to the industry. We’ve given back over the years with our donations to AOA, Quechua Benefit and other organizations that strive to continue the unique alpaca industry. We’re proud of all that we’ve done.

Also, for the last five years, I have worked closely with a local high school. We offer an internship to one junior or senior student that is interested in pursuing a career with animals. I have him or her for the school year. I’m on my fifth intern and there is a waiting list. They earn college credits and an actual grade from their advisor after I evaluate their performance.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

We’re excited about the future! High quality Suri

alpacas have their own niche and buyers know what they want, and if they don’t, they are not afraid to ask questions. We have seen that prices are on the rise for these high-end alpacas. Secondly, we have seen a rise in Huacaya breeders diversifying more by purchasing only high quality Suris for their herd. Oregon Alpaca Farm has been involved in several of these transactions. It’s been great fun showing the “other side of the alpaca!” We hope to continue our pursuit of the elite Suri alpaca and meet new friends and forge new partnerships along the way.

Elizabeth Taylor

Spotted Circus Alpacas | Freedom, Indiana

How did you get into alpacas?

I got into alpacas in late 2010. My husband and I were in Tractor Supply and saw their magazine with an alpaca on the cover that said “Alpacas: the investment you can hug.” Alpaca open farm days was the next weekend and we went to three farms in the area and saw everything from a very fancy farm to one with simple shelters and decided that we could do that, too. We bought our first four boys in January of 2011 and I immediately started learning how to spin, knit and dye fiber. I vended at my first fiber festival that year and have a very successful online Etsy store. I connected with Trip Forstner of Magical Farms later that spring which led to a long relationship teaching fiber classes at Magical and helping to manage their fiber sales. One of the classes I had there involved Ruth Elvestad from Olds College teaching a fiber sorting class. At the time, I took the class because she was there and it made sense since I was hosting it. This later led to me becoming a Master Fiber Classer and being one of the main sorters for the Alpaca Coalition of America’s (ACO) fiber collection along with Wini Labrecque.

Currently, I teach classes across the U.S. to alpaca owners on how to utilize their fiber and add value in the cottage industry. I also travel to several large farms to sort their fiber at shearing to help them get the best return for their fiber and to help them make decisions on possible culls based on fiber characteristics. I’ve also learned how to tan alpaca hides and have an ebook on Amazon called “Tanning Alpaca Hides at Home.” I am one of several Accredited Spin Off judges for Alpaca Owners Association (AOA). I think one of most important things is, “when in doubt, try it out.” You won’t know if you like something until you try it.

What are your main goals?

My main goals would be to help owners figure out how to make their alpacas profitable and to have fun



Taylor got into alpacas somewhat serendipitously, when she and her husband saw an alpaca on the cover of the Tractor Supply magazine. Since then she has dedicated herself to becoming educated about alpaca fiber and now teaches classes to American breeders illustrating how they can use their fiber as part of the vibrant cottage industry.

doing it. If you don't enjoy what you do, then why are you doing it? Breeding wise, I want to breed a super consistent fleeced animal and I like them in unusual colors that appeal to the cottage industry such as harlequin greys, the greyed fawns and maroon animals. I want to help change crafters' minds about alpaca. A lot of the alpaca that's available out there is very hairy and causes the knitter to itch after knitting it up or it sheds badly. As an industry, we have to put out quality products that don't have these characteristics to be able to compete with the wool yarns that are out there. I see alpaca being offered to crafters that hasn't been skirted at all or has a high level of guard hair and if both the owner and the public isn't educated about what to look for in quality alpaca their one experience with alpaca fiber could be their last. I'd also really like to educate owners that want to submit their fleece commercially how to get the best bang for their buck. I see a lot of fleeces submitted that haven't been skirted at all, or have too much debris or are tender. Those are fleeces that aren't going to be valued at their

highest value because of simple things that the owner could have done to improve it.

What is your model based on?

My own fiber gets mainly utilized for yarn for my online and fiber festival presence. I also utilize it in the classes that I teach. Some goes to either Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America (AFCNA) or ACOA for fleeces that I don't have large enough batches to make processing worthwhile. While I am sorting on a farm, I also buy fleeces in bulk that would be upgraded to a higher grade based on guard hair. This year I bought about 200 pounds of grade 1-3 white and fawn from a very large farm that I sorted and am having commercially de-haired and spun for my use in my Etsy store. I also am going to be utilizing the pelts of cria that I have lost this year in making small ornaments for sale or selling the pelts whole.

What makes your project unique?

I think I have a unique position in that I do vend and sell to the cottage industry but also have a hand in the commercial industry. There is a place for all alpaca fiber. With some, your return is better in processing it yourself, other fiber is better sent to a commercial collection such as ACOA or New England Alpaca Fiber Pool (NEAFP). If you want to sell to the cottage industry, I can help you do that. Whether it's teaching you how to wash and dye your fiber, what blending fibers to use or where to market it, I want you to be successful. I'm also good at going to a farm to evaluate your herd's fiber for usability without sentimentality. There are some animals in a herd that in reality are going to be what I'd call "freeloaders." These animals aren't of breeding quality and produce fiber that in reality is good for rugs or have such a loss in dehairing that financially it doesn't make sense to keep them around. When I first got into alpacas, I never imagined culling an animal for meat or hides. In reality, to continue to have a good breeding program and to have a high quality fiber harvest, you do need to be culling. Whether it is to a pet home or to have the animal humanely put down and utilized in another manner, you have to be able to cut your losses. What I don't want to see is that animal showing up in a pet home later on having not been shorn for several years. I'd rather know what will happen to that animal and that it will be treated in a humane and dignified manner. When I go to a farm to sort their clip I can take the heart out of decisions. Regardless of who Fluffy is, what their age or lineage is, I'll give you my honest opinion of what that animal is like fiber-wise.



Alvina Maynard has been involved in a wide range of projects within the alpaca industry including Kentucky Cloth and is the current champion of the Parade of Champions Cook-off. Her goals are to “grow our farm as a commercial alpaca fiber operation and agritourism destination.” She is passionately dedicated to the idea of the American alpaca industry embracing a livestock model.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

I think that the future is looking interesting right now. Since I got in in 2010, there has been a lot of change. I see a lot of farms not necessarily basing breeding decisions on the show ring but on what usable fiber is being produced. A sub-20 micron fleeced animal, while nice, is not as useable as a good 22-24 micron animal. I'd take a consistent grade 5 animal over an inconsistent grade 1 fleece any day. I think that there are several models out there that have a fiber producing herd that utilize an animals fiber until it is no longer profitable at which point it becomes a meat and hide animal. I think that educating the public on what makes a good alpaca fleece will help to create the demand for better fleece and start to increase the price. We as an industry shouldn't be giving away fleece for free or just throwing it away because we don't know what to do with it. Some sheep fleeces go for \$50+ a pound in the cottage industry. Our fiber is just as fine, will have less of a loss during washing and should be valued just as much as wool.

Alvina Maynard River Hill Ranch | Richmond, Kentucky

How did you get into alpacas?

Three reasons: 1. I'm weird. 2. Divine intervention. 3. Alpacas are awesome. Leaving the military, I couldn't see myself working a “normal” job. We wanted a rural life for our children but didn't want to spend our lives mowing grass, so we went looking for lawn mowers. Not being from Ag, I knew we'd have to find a niche: alpacas seemed weird enough. I liked that my children could be around them with low risk of injury, every product they produce is high quality, and being a part of helping the industry mature was a welcome challenge. Of course I thought I needed a challenge before I understood what a challenge being a stay-at-home-mom really is, but the farm keeps us all laughing through the crazy instead of killing each other.

What are your main goals?

1. Pursue happiness. I've got life and liberty, thank God. I'm finally figuring out how to live joyously every-day (but it still takes focus).

2. Spread love for each other and our beautifully imperfect world. People come to visit our ranch because of the alpacas, but I hope they leave with an appreciation that the problems we face don't have simple answers; that our world is a super-complex set of overlapping systems and we're all just doing the best we can with what we know. I hope to spark greater curiosity to explore with a mind open to new information and a heart ready to love instead of being burdened with our own paradigms.

3. Grow our farm as a commercial alpaca fiber operation and agritourism destination. When we win the lottery, we've got our sights set on several adjacent properties. Until then, we offer mowing services to our non-farming neighbors, go to farmers' market, and have a blast giving tours and Ranch Camp.

What is your model based on?

The need for our industry to grow into a complete Livestock Model. We are still ridiculously top-heavy with farms vying to be seedstock. We need ranchers raising herds in the hundreds for the products these animals produce. We tried to be both a multiplier and commercial herd, but found the two management approaches were too much for just one person to handle so we needed to focus.

What makes your project unique?

One of the major issues we saw impacting the emergence of commercial alpaca farms was the operating cost: folks were spending more per head in annual operating cost than they were making on their fiber harvest. So we started questioning every expense. We looked to other livestock industries that were going grass-fed. We learned about intensive rotational grazing. We became friends with commercial wool producers and learned how they made it work. And then we learned that lamb subsidizes wool. We knew the whole time that alpaca meat was going to be part of our business, but we came to realize that the financial success of the whole industry requires it. Nothing goes to waste if I can help it, and everything that can bring revenue to the ranch is sent to market.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

Part of the modern natural fiber renaissance we are already seeing a glimpse of is consumers becoming more aware of the impact fashion has on our environment and wanting to make a positive change with how they spend their dollars. I see our industry leadership attending and being recognized in larger agriculture

and textile circles as we are seen as more legitimate and are invited to have a seat at those tables. I see A LOT of research being funded because we fiber producers have A LOT of management questions and some of us are learning to write grants and work with universities. And in the not too distant future, I see the monetary value of alpacas being based on the value of product they produce. As we breed less but hope to grow the herd more, the success of our business depends on alpaca breeders producing animals that are hardy (they're no good to me if I'm spending money de-worming them all the time), with high-quality fiber (I'd like grade 2 with an S/D under 4 and blanket shearing weight of at least three pounds), and good enough size that I get a good meat harvest, but not so big that they require more feed (160-185 lbs. is good).

Chris and Jody Hatch

Salmon River Alpacas | Pulaski, New York

How did you get into alpacas?

Funny story, I had been researching various entrepreneur opportunities and meeting with small business and woman-owned business development groups. I wanted something that would allow me the opportunity to have a flexible work schedule as we looked toward our future of having children. One evening as I was searching online and agonizing over the fact that nothing

Jody and Chris Hatch pause between daily chores. Their business and farm goals are built around the question "Does it make us happy?"



SUZIE MILLER / SUZIE MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY



SUZIE MILLER / SUZIE MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

Jody and Chris Hatch and sons Lincoln, left, and Collin, right, at the entrance to their barn in Pulaski, New York. One of the main reasons they decided to raise alpacas was to be able to stay home with their kids. It evolved from there and now Chris specializes in shearing while Jody takes on marketing.

seemed to fit, my husband Chris hollered from the living room. “How about alpacas? A commercial just came on about alpacas. Look at that.” I missed the commercial but was quick to do a search because I did not know what an alpaca was. Within a few minutes, I was on the phone making an appointment at a nearby farm. When we pulled up to the farm two days later, an overwhelming sense of “this is it” came over me. We became alpaca owners that day. The rest is history.

What are your main goals?

The main goal of our program was based on “Why do this?” We needed to figure out the best way for me to stay at home with the kids. Freedom and profitability drove our learning. The focus shifted many times as we strived to establish what worked best for our growing family as well as what we personally enjoyed about our alpaca lifestyle.

I think the most important question you can ask yourself regarding your goal is “Why? Why that goal?” If you don’t know your “why,” the goal is not generally great enough to go after. The bottom line always came down to “Does it make us happy? If not, adjust accordingly.” We are most happy connecting and serving others in the industry. I specialize in marketing/sales and Chris in shearing. We have each found a way to use our talents to support others in the industry as well as financially support our family.

What is your model based on?

It was apparent about five years ago that our model

needed to shift more towards the livestock model. The decision did not come lightly and took almost two years to implement. We quietly began culling alpaca from our herd for our own personal use. We understand that this is not for everyone, but for our business it was essential.

What makes your project unique?

I am working to put into place an organized system to support an industry-wide livestock model (for those that choose to use the service). I want the system to be in place so that others can implement into the growth of their own breeding programs.

My goal is to provide real dollars for those seeking to cull but who are not looking to market alpaca meat themselves. At this point, the system is progressing on a small scale in the east, but I am looking to expand throughout the country. It’s a fine balance of supply and demand and coordinating processing facilities and product transport to buyers. The world is a big place and the demand is real. It’s just a matter of putting all of the pieces into place.

What does the future of the alpaca industry look like to you?

I see the industry continuing to grow but evolving more into a true livestock model operation for sustainability in program development. But the most promising future I see is on the faces of alpaca owners who love what and how they live their own unique alpaca lifestyle.



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