

# A Match Made in Heaven

by Kathleen Deyer Bolduc

**J**ulie Bodette, owner of Sunny Meade Alpacas, Ltd., drove south on I-75, hauling a trailer holding Ray, Lucado, Starbuck, and Otis, aka “the boys.” Three other alpaca owners accompanied her. Despite a few tears, Julie maintained a steady 65 mph as she headed toward Safe Haven Farms, a community of choice for adults with autism, newly established in southwest Ohio. Julie’s boys were heading toward their new home.

“I really wanted this to work, but I was worried that it wouldn’t,” Julie says from her home near Swanton, Ohio. She was donating four of her 23 alpacas to the just-up-and-running Safe Haven Farms. “I had been working for weeks to desensitize the boys for their new owners, who had autism. What if they were spooked by a farmer’s unexpected movements or noises? What if they spit, or even worse, kicked a Safe Haven farmer?”

Three hours later, Julie’s truck pulled into the driveway of their destination, formerly a sixty acre horse farm, now home to sixteen adults with autism and a staff of over fifty. Julie’s sister, Kimberly Buechner Fouse, along with Kimberly’s husband, Dick, pulled up at almost the same moment. They were greeted by Denny Rogers, founder of Safe Haven Farms, Mike Brinck, farm manager, and Joel Bolduc, brand-new Safe Haven resident.

One by one the boys were led down the ramp from the trailer into the barn.

“We didn’t know what to expect,” Julie said. “Would they behave? How would Joel react? Would he spook them?”

Everyone held their breath as Joel approached Starbuck, a handsome black alpaca with big brown eyes. Julie held Starbuck’s lead, whispering quietly into his ear. “Hold out your hand, Joel,” she said. Joel stuck out his hand and let Starbuck sniff it, then immediately moved in for a double-armed hug and snuggle. Starbuck calmly and graciously accepted the hug, and was promptly rewarded with a big kiss from Joel. Laughter lit up the gloomy barn, along with the flash of several cameras.



Joel and Starbuck

“It was quite magical, seeing that reaction,” Julie laughs, looking back at the big moment. “It was confirmation to me that these animals are intuitive.”

Julie stumbled into the alpaca business twelve years ago. A graphic designer who grew up with horses and planned on building a barn for horses on her five acre spread, Julie met with a potential customer who needed a logo for her alpaca farm. One look at the new cria on the customer’s farm and Julie fell head over heels for alpacas. She started up her own alpaca business a month later.

Julie’s sister, Kimberly, and brother-in-law, Dick, own an alpaca breeding business as well. Alpacas of the Covenant Inc. is located in Cold Spring, Kentucky. While their breeding businesses are separate, the sisters own a third business together, All Things Alpaca, LLC, which has as its product the Alpaca Fleece-filled Bird Nesting Ball, which is sold in specialty nature stores across the country and through their website.

Like night and day, the sisters make a perfect whole. Julie is the creative half of the team, while Kimberly has the business skills to implement the dreams and ideas. The sisters’ mission? Share the abundance. Build a better community. Give back. Help people to grow as individuals as well as help them grow their businesses. As Julie put it, “We want to make a difference in people’s lives.”

Julie’s business, Sunny Meade Alpacas, Ltd. is located in Swanton, Ohio, just down the road from Bittersweet Farms, the first farming community for adults with autism in the United States. Julie also has a neighbor with autism and had seen the intuitive spark between her alpacas and the young man down the road. She decided to check out Bittersweet Farms and see if they’d be interested in forming



“The Boys” Ray, Lucado, Otis and Starbuck



some kind of partnership.

Bittersweet Farms said no thank you; they already had their hands full with a herd of sheep and various other animals, so Julie put that idea to rest. It wasn't until the next year that Kimberly heard of a new farm for adults with autism forming in southwest Ohio. A few phone calls were made, contacts established, and Julie made the decision to donate Ray, Lucado, Starbuck and Otis to Safe Haven Farms.

Autism is a complex neurological disorder with no known cause or cure. One out of ninety-one American children is now diagnosed with autism. While services for children with autism have been mushrooming, services for adults fall far short of meeting their needs. Safe Haven Farms was founded by a group of parents who dreamed of seeing their young adult children with autism fulfill their potential. Bittersweet Farms served as their model. Safe Haven Farm's mission? To fill the work and residential void for adults with autism in southwest Ohio, and to create a community where



*Sisters Kimberly, the 'Organizer' and Julie, the 'Creative Half'*

meaningful work takes place in a safe and nurturing farm setting.

Julie and Kimberly believed Safe Haven's mission dovetailed nicely with their own, and Julie had four animals that were no longer appropriate breeding stock. Ray, although sporting beautiful fleece in a rare shade of brown, had a heart murmur. Otis's white fleece and blue eyes signaled a genetic combination that sometimes results in deafness. Lucado was not robust enough to use as a herdsire, and Starbuck, a beauty in black, was hard to market because of his age.

"I could have sold them as pets, you know? These animals could just be pretty pasture ornaments, but I wanted

them to serve more purposeful lives," Julie explains.

As Kimberly puts it, "The boys just didn't fit into Julie's breeding program. We know that people with autism often have a hard time fitting in, too. Julie wanted her animals to have a purpose, and we knew that was one of Safe Haven's goals, as well—for the farmers to live meaningful lives. It seemed like a perfect match."

It turned out the boys would serve an even greater purpose than that of companions at Safe Haven Farms. Their fleece would be used to create bird nesting balls, a product made and sold by Julie and Kimberly's joint venture, All Things Alpaca, LLC.

"We were looking for a way to diversify our livestock businesses," Kimberly says, thinking back to how the idea for the bird nesting balls came about. Both sisters send fiber collected in each year's shearing to Willow Bridge Fiber Mill in Wisconsin, to be spun into yarn, which is sold on the company's website. After shearing, there are always seconds left over—fiber from the upper leg, neck, hip, and shoulder. One spring shearing day Julie watched bird after bird fly off with the fleece that lined the driveway. Her creative juices started flowing.

Why not fashion a ball, about the size of a softball, she thought, out of grapevine and jute. Then, wind three or four colors of huacaya fiber into and around the ball, and finish it off with a jute rope for

hanging. Birds would flock to the balls in spring and summer for nesting material.

"They're the perfect "green" earth-friendly product," Kimberly says with characteristic enthusiasm as she speaks of the resulting creation. "They're biodegradable—the grapevine and jute will disintegrate over time. They have no smell, so they don't draw predators to the birds. They're round, symbolizing wholeness. The hollow fiber doesn't retain moisture; it fluffs up again after it rains. The color is natural, and blends into the environment. And the birds love them!" Titmice, especially, she says, enjoy playing with the balls. "So, it's not only a great source of nesting material for the birds—it's interactive!"

The sisters' plan is to hire Safe Haven Farms as a contractor for the nesting balls. It's a win-win situation. It has been found that work with a concrete end result improves behaviors and increases the focus of people on the autism spectrum. Safe Haven will share a shearer with Alpacas of the Covenant, Inc. in the spring of the year, and will send the fiber to Willow Bridge Fiber Mill in Wisconsin for processing into skeins of yarn. The seconds will be used to make nesting balls, providing meaningful work for Safe Haven's farmers.

All Things Alpaca will pay the farmers for the nesting balls, bringing revenue to the farm. And finally, Safe Haven's farmers will sell the nesting balls and their yarn at farmer's markets in the area, which will help them develop social skills as well as business skills in the greater community.

Currently sixteen adults with autism live and work at Safe Haven Farms, in four houses where each individual is part of a close-knit and supportive farm family. Two more houses will be built in the near future, housing eight more residents. Plans are in the works for an additional eight to ten adults to participate in the day program, living off-site.



*Signature Nesting Ball - One of the nesting balls so appreciated by the birds in the spring.*

*Photo by Wild Birds Unlimited, Saratoga Springs, NY*



While much of daily life at Safe Haven Farms revolves around farming - planting and raising vegetables, caring for animals, maintaining walking trails, landscaping, etc. - an equally important part of daily activity revolves around their day program, which includes a therapeutic arts program. The nesting balls they make will make fit perfectly into that program.

At last visit, it was obvious that “the boys” had made a successful transition to their new home. While they’ve been transitioning, the sixteen resident farmers have been transitioning as well. This is the first time many of these adults have lived away from the family home. Transitions are exceptionally difficult for persons with autism, who prefer predictability and routine.

For Joel Bolduc, resident, a walk around the farm, including a visit to the paddock where the alpacas hang out, is usually just what is needed for calming when he is missing Mom and Dad.

Another farmer has struck up quite a relationship with Safe Haven’s newest four-legged residents. While the other farmers feed the boys in their stalls, Jake



has taken to sitting in the middle of the paddock, feed in hand, waiting for Starbuck, Lucado, Otis and Ray to approach him. It seems to be a calming activity for all involved, including the staff, who speak of it with awe.

“I hope for this to be an on-going relationship,” Julie says. “I would love to continue as a mentor to these folks.” Visionary that she is, when asked about her plans for the future, Julie doesn’t hesitate. “I’m thinking about how neat it would be to add an ability class at the local alpaca show. You know - a class where Safe Haven farmers can participate and show their animals without a lot of stress. Raise some

awareness in the community. Raise the farmer’s self-esteem. That kind of thing.”

Sounds a lot like the sisters’ mission mentioned earlier. Share the abundance. Build a better community. Give back. Help people grow as individuals as well as help them grow their businesses.

Julie shed a few more tears on the drive back to Swanton the day she dropped off the boys at Safe Haven Farms. But this time around, they were tears of joy.

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**About the Author**

*Kathleen Deyer Bolduc is a nationally recognized author and speaker in the field of inclusion ministry, concentrating on disability’s impact on the family system, and ways in which churches can become more welcoming of families that live with disability. Her books include Autism and Alleluias, A Place Called Acceptance: Ministry with Families of Children with Disabilities, and His Name is Joel: Searching for God in a Son’s Disability. Her articles have appeared in Guideposts, The Cincinnati Enquirer, and The Journal of Religion, Disability and Health, among others. Her son, Joel, who gave Starbuck such an enthusiastic welcome, is one of the sixteen farmers now residing at Safe Haven Farms. Kathleen’s books and speaking schedule can be found at:*

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