Harvard's alpacas warm the hearts of wounded warriors

BY LAURA VILAIN · THURSDAY, MARCH 1, 2018

On a cold, drizzly Saturday last weekend, Matt Varrell, co-owner with his wife, Amy, of the Harvard Alpaca Ranch on Old Mill Road, welcomed 25 veterans and family members of the Wounded Warrior Project. The hosts stood in the openedend of their barn while the wind and rain blew in, with a bedraggled, wet alpaca named Sir Erik of Spudland, or Erik for short. "He may be wet and muddy, but when you dig your fingers into Erik's fur, he's warm and dry on the inside," said Varrell. Very curious in the pasture beyond were 14 other alpacas, including Windjammer, Natalie, Black Rock, Ivanhoe, and Charlie, wondering doe-eyed at their visitors. Looking so inviting in their sweet-natured, docile way, alpacas can sometimes trick you by pulling away just as you reach for them, Amy Varrell warned the group. Or they may even surprise you.



Ashley Mahoney (left) and Wayne Johnson feed treats to the alpacas. Moments later, when a nervous alpaca spit at Johnson, he laughed it off. (Photos by Isabel Barton)

Retired U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Wayne Johnson of Lynn, who served in Iraq, experienced an alpaca "surprise" firsthand. Surrounded by humans offering food, alpaca Natalie may have been distressed after she spied one of the veterans' service dog. Suddenly she quite forcefully blasted Johnson with a combination of air, spit, and some predigested grain, covering him head to chest. "Well, that was a surprise," Johnson said good-naturedly. Varrell, to much laughter from the group, declared, "Now you're one of the pack!" Being one of the pack in the broader sense is important to Johnson. He explained the term "redefining relationships"—an important part of the Wounded Warrior Project's mission. He described the relationships in warfare as being "a bond like no other." He continued, "When you come home, the bond is not there anymore; it's broken. Your brothers and sisters go off, and you don't see them as much." Accompanied by his daughter-in-law, Ashley Mahoney from Wilmington, he explained that with both his sons being veterans and with an understanding family at home, they are fortunate in sharing a family connection. "But to get out like this," he added, "is fantastic."



Yubing Liu smiles as Black Rock eats out of her hand.

A self-proclaimed "city boy," Marine Corps officer Sean Johnson (no relation to Wayne) traveled three and a half hours from the Bronx to the alpaca ranch with three generations of his family: his mother, his daughter, and his sister, who brought her young son. Johnson served in Iraq and agreed that the different events run by the Wounded Warrior Project help connect him with other service people and help his family have fun, too. Johnson explained, "Anything that makes you smile or happy, and when you bring your family and they're happy, that just makes you happy so it improves your mental state."

A therapeutic setting

The Varrells opened their ranch in April 2016 with the aim of building a healthy herd of alpacas for farm visits, agritourism, retail fiber sales, and a therapy program. Matt, formerly an environmental biologist who did wetlands consulting, and Amy, a registered nurse, shared their story with the Wounded Warriors group of how their youngest son with a condition of constant migraines inspired them to invest in alpacas.



Andre Evelyn is excited to feed a treat to an alpaca named Black Rock.

Life was challenging for Rusty Varrell, especially his first semester away at college, according to his mother. She said that in additon to the pills, acupuncture, and injections to the head, Rusty managed to stay in school by finding comfort in his daily visits to a local alpaca ranch. There, he was befriended by a somewhat aloof alpaca, Sonni. "Rusty would go to the barn and sit down, and Sonni would walk up and lay her head in his lap," said Amy. Matt picked up the story: "The folks who owned the farm called us and said, 'This is unheard of.' They had never seen anything like it before." Though the close engagement was unusual, the bond was not. "I think alpacas saved his life," said Amy.

After seeing the positive impact the alpacas had on Rusty, the Varrells knew "we were embarking on a very special journey indeed." And that journey had a kickstart when Ariana Evans of the Wounded Warrior Project called.



From left: After meeting the alpacas, Sheril Coleman, Christina Chaplin, and Ariana Evans learn how to make alpaca-felt-wrapped soap bars from the ranch coowner, Amy Varrell.

Evans, the outreach coordinator for the Boston Metrowest office, who also covers events in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, and Maine, read online about the Varrells' alpaca ranch. "We're always looking to do different stuff, something unique, and we are always very interested in animal-focused events." According to Evans, veterans and their families traveled to the Varrells' ranch from as far away as New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island as well as towns all over Massachusetts. Although the visit to the ranch was free to project members and guests, the Wounded Warrior Project covered the Varrells' costs.

Evans explained that the Wounded Warrior Project serves veterans who have had a physical or mental injury or illness that happened on or after Sept. 11, 2001. She noted that there is a prevalence of veterans attending events with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.



Matt Varrell (left), co-owner of Harvard Alpaca Ranch, introduces Erik, the alpaca, to the group.

The Wounded Warrior website explains that with advances in battlefield medicine and body armor, military operations since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks—Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and New Dawn—see more soldiers surviving what previously would have been lethal injuries. When these wounded return, they need additional help readjusting to civilian life. Currently, the project serves more than 111,000 veterans and service members and more than 27,000 family members, according to the project's website. And while in previous years there has been controversy over executive compensation, with changes in management of the Wounded Warrior Project last year, it has been cleared and endorsed by the Better Business Bureau, according to the Washington Post.

Two halves of an acorn

And the Wounded Warrior Project continues with its mission. Just ask retired U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Shirley Holbrook, from Coventry, Connecticut. At first she was hesitant and watchful of the alpacas. Then, with a handful of pellets, she ventured toward them. Stew, her rescue service dog from K9s For Warriors, looked on, sitting by the barn door. The alpacas nibbled at her hand and Holbrook smiled—a big smile. When asked if she believed in the Wounded Warrior Project, Holbrook enthusiastically replied, "Do I ever! It helps big time." She said she tries to go to most of the events, including several daylong Odyssey trips—intense recovery retreats helping veterans work through challenges related to combat stress.

Describing her experience, Holbrook said, "For some reason I walk around and I get like an acorn"—she paused—"and the acorn has two parts: over here [the nut] and over here now [the cap.] But by the time we left, I was like this"—she held her hands together and grinned—"so you put the acorn together again."



Ivanhoe, a rain-soaked alpaca, having what can only be described as a bad hair day, Feb. 25 at the Harvard Alpaca Ranch.