

Missouri Woman Raises Alpaca At Farm For Therapy

AP Wire Service

By Denise Hollinshed,
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

SPANISH LAKE, MO (AP) – When retirees in wheelchairs recently gathered at a nursing home here to trade some stories, a guest with perhaps the most improbable story had nothing to say. She was Holli – not a person but an alpaca, maybe the only one on wheels.

Doomed twice but still going strong, the domesticated camelid in a custom-built wheelchair brings amusement to old and young alike, validating the hopes of an owner who, with others, has spent a small fortune to spare her life.

In the visit to the Hidden Lake Care Center, “Holli was able to come right up in her wheelchair and join the other folks in their wheelchairs and walkers and the ones sitting in rockers,” explained her owner, Michelle Zumwalt. She raises the creatures in north St. Louis County at the Alpaca Patch.

Terry Foster, Hidden Lake’s nursing director, said Holli’s visit was both therapeutic and fun. “It was such an endearing event,” she said. “I was just so proud to be part of it.”

Alpacas are usually prized for their coats. Annual shearing produces luxurious fiber durable enough to make heirloom clothing, blankets and rugs. But Holli is prized as an inspiration.

Unlike the therapy dogs that visit Hidden Lake on Mondays, the spine-damaged Holli arrived in a wheelchair, at the same level as many of the residents, Zumwalt explained. “So they could reach out and really handle her,

and she’s very patient and very energetic and enthusiastic to interact with them.”

Alzheimer’s patients are especially drawn to her, Zumwalt said. “She seems to really encourage them because she has never given up. ... She makes them laugh.”

Children from schools or Scout troops who tour the farm respond just as well, she said. “She has a light that she shares with children that have had a very difficult life and been abused.”

Zumwalt, 48, whose farm has a reputation for rescuing alpacas, obtained Holli in September from a South County farm that lacked resources to handle the premature newborn.

“We just found that that is where our heart is, to help the ones that just need a little bit of help, and then they thrive,” Zumwalt said.

Holli rebounded, but a setback came 20 days later. A dog, boarded temporarily with Zumwalt, spooked the alpaca herd, and the young newcomer’s spine was damaged in the commotion. She was paralyzed from the waist down. That cut her life expectancy to months or less; a usual course of action is euthanasia.

Zumwalt chose an alternative: acupuncture, massages, water therapy, supplements and other treatments. Along the way, she said, caregivers watched for signs of suffering. “We will not ask anything of an animal that is beyond what they are comfortable with,” she said. “Our goal was always to try to give her a chance.”

Holli responded almost immediately.

“She did not want to give up.”

The treatments were not just grueling but expensive. Zumwalt estimated that she has spent more than \$10,000. Along the way, she was laid off from her job at U.S. Fidelis, the extended auto service contract marketer, and resorted to garage sales to help meet Holli’s needs.

Neighbors, friends and strangers donated generously. “Little kids would come to visit her and bring a dollar,” Zumwalt said.

She and others modified a walker to help hold up the animal. Word about Holli spread through the alpaca show world. Valerie Smith of Topeka, KS, was so taken by Holli that she paid to have a \$700, one-of-a-kind wheelchair built. A harness holds Holli up as she uses her front legs to inch her way along, while her limp back legs dangle between the wheels.

“When I heard about Holli, I knew it’s just like a baby with multiple physical handicaps,” said Smith, 58, an occupational therapist. Smith and her husband sought medical opinions and helped

bring Holli to the care of Dr. David E. Anderson, a professor of veterinary medicine at Kansas State University.

He told a reporter that animals with profound problems – or their owners – often become overwhelmed and give up. But not Zumwalt and Holli.

“These types of injuries require intensive daily care, physical therapy and muscle stimulation to maintain any hope of recovery.” Anderson said. Holli’s progress, he suggested, is remarkable, perhaps miraculous.

“At this point, I would have to speculate that Holli has every chance of living a high-quality life,” he said. “Based on her response to the therapy she has received, she may even have the opportunity to walk again. Her ready adaptation of the wheelchair is a testament to her desire to get up and going.”

Zumwalt said the next step will be an evaluation in September, to see whether Holli might be a candidate for hip replacements. Information from: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, <http://www.stltoday.com>

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