

Alpaca stars of Baldwin City's Ad Astra farm



Elvyn Jones

A young male alpaca nuzzles Claudia Hey on Monday during her short visit to the male pasture of the Ad Astra Alpacas farm she owns with her husband, Bob, south of Baldwin City. The couple's herd of the South American animal has grown from three to 59. [Enlarge photo](#)

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As visitors approach the city limits of Baldwin City, they may expect to see the brick roads and university campus, but one thing that may take them by surprise is a herd of alpacas peering over the fence, welcoming them to town.

Bob and Claudia Hey of Baldwin City own Ad Astra Alpacas farm, 168 E. 1700 Rd., south of Baldwin City. The farm is Claudia's childhood farm, which used to be a dairy farm.

When she and Bob moved back, Claudia couldn't stand to see the farm empty, and yearned for livestock to fill the barns and pasture. However, she wasn't looking for just any animal.

"I knew I didn't want cows, because you milk those twice a day every day. There's never a vacation," Claudia said. "I also knew I would be attached to whatever I got so I didn't want anything I was going to become attached to and then have to send it off to market."

After seeing an ad for alpacas and doing some research, the Heys purchased three alpacas from a farm in Wisconsin.

They now have 59 alpacas, which are all "very gentle, very inquisitive," that they share with the community from time to time. They have taken the alpacas to the summer reading program for the kids to enjoy, as well as to the assisted living center and nursing homes.

"Some of those old farmers that are missing their livestock; we let them lead them up and down the sidewalk and everything," Claudia said.

Ad Astra Alpacas farm belongs to the Midwest Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association, an organization that works toward the growth of the alpaca industry. More than 100 alpaca breeders belong to MOPACA.

"One of the reasons that people are interested in raising alpacas is because they are wonderful critters. They're really, really nice animals," MOPACA Board Director Gwen Wolff said. "They're easy to handle. They have pretty gentle temperaments. They're not a predator like a dog is and so you don't have to worry about them biting someone."

Members of MOPACA receive educational benefits, as the organization hosts seminars in which "national experts" present to the group on topics such as color genetics, dyeing and diseases. Members also receive access to advertising through the website as a way to attract visitors to their farms.

Over the course of the past year, the Heys have welcomed six baby alpacas to their farm. In correlation to their farm name, "Ad Astra," which was borrowed from the Kansas state motto and means "to the stars," each baby is named after a star, something in the sky or some sort of heavenly body. Names range from Jupiter to Zeus to Halley from Halley's Comet.

Claudia said they left off the second part of the state motto, "per aspera," which means through difficulties.

"We didn't want the difficulties, so we just chopped that part off," she said.

The Heys have taken their alpacas to shows in Topeka and Kansas City and also as far away as Oklahoma. Awards include categories such as best all-around alpaca, best fleece and small, intermediate and large breeders, which is based on the number of alpacas on a farm.

"There aren't as many (shows) in the Midwest, and we don't really like to take them that far, I think it's hard on them, but ... if you wanted to and you had the money and time to travel, there are some alpaca shows most every weekend," Claudia said.

Each spring, they shear the alpacas to collect their fleece. Bob compares the process to shearing sheep, of which 20 or 30 sheep can be sheared with one pair of cutting clippers.

"Sometimes, I'll only get one (with one pair of clippers) because they lay down and roll in the dirt and the dirt collects on the midline from the back of the neck and back," Bob said. "As soon as they get into that dirt, it dulls the clippers."

Alpacas come in 22 natural colors, all of which are present at Ad Astra Alpacas, except for gray. The fiber of the fleece is very valuable, as it is hypoallergenic and has "a very low prickle factor."

"It is generally people who are allergic to wool who can wear alpaca because it doesn't have the lanolin in it that wool does," Wolff said. "The structure of the alpaca is such that it doesn't have the barbs that stick out as far as the wool does, and that the prickle factor is what makes a fiber itchy to someone."

After shearing the alpacas, they strip the fiber to be sent to the New England Alpaca Fiber Pool in Fall River, Mass., where it is made into products such as scarves, sweaters, socks and gloves. Other fiber is sent to Texas to be made into rugs.

"I sort it according to grade, and then we send it off after I get it all done and have it made into products that I sell here in the shop," Claudia said. "Depending on the grade is what I determine I'm going to have it made in to."

Although Bob works at Hey Machinery during the day, Claudia focuses her days around taking care of and feeding the alpacas, as well as preparing and working in her shop. She is continually finding new products to introduce to her store.

"We are just are beginning to scratch the surface of what all we can do with alpaca fiber. We were involved with a thing called a felt loom and ... and I made some things with that. I made these dog beds and it's stuffed with alpaca fiber that I swept up off the floor. This is another application of what you can do with it."

Although the farm and store sit outside of town and are not heavily advertised, their store sees quite a bit of business. Ad Astra Alpacas was part of the Kaw Valley Farm Tour, which took place on the first weekend in October and led to more than 1,000 customers this year.

They will also be having a holiday open house after Thanksgiving.

"I tell everybody to go to the mall on Black Friday," Claudia said. "But then when you're tired with the crowds, come here."

As out of the ordinary as an alpaca farm is, the Heys take pride and pleasure in knowing they have raised healthy alpacas that can bring a smile to theirs and members of the community's faces. Aside from the time and effort they put into the alpacas, what they enjoy most is just watching them enjoy the farm as much as they do.

"It's fun to watch them. A lot of times in the evening, they'll just run ... sometimes the whole herd will run out and run around and come back in and turn around and go do it," Bob said. "It's also something we can watch as a sign of well-being; they're feeling good."

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