

# Alpacas Help Reduce Youth Violence

by Daryl W. Goodrich, JD

If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is there, does it make noise? Many are familiar with this proverbial question. But, what does it mean?

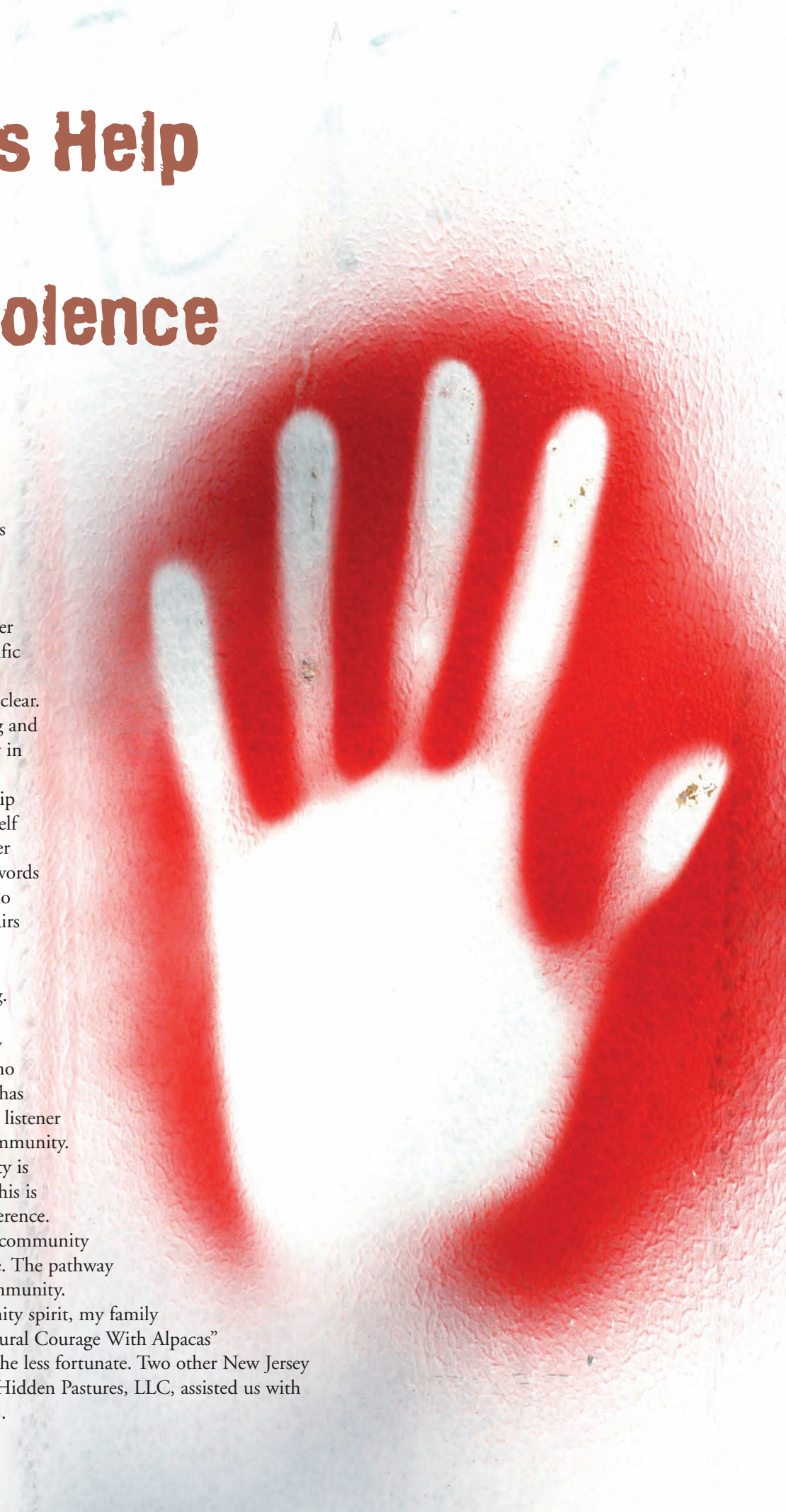
For years, I have searched for a deeper meaning than the obvious “yes” scientific answer. In a leadership class I recently took, a deeper meaning finely became clear. I realized it means that I have meaning and value only by virtue of the community in which I exist.

As I stood before my fellow leadership classmates one evening expressing myself on that evening’s class topic, this deeper meaning revealed itself. I realized my words falling on the chairs before me made no noise unless classmates sat in those chairs listening to my words.

Noise really only exists to the extent it is heard by at least one human being. Noise has no meaning or value unless somebody hears it. If a radio talk show host talks but has no listeners, he has no meaning or value. The talk show host has meaning and value only because of his listener community. I do not exist without community. I am one with community. Community is therefore critically important to me. This is why I am committed to making a difference.

I also realized that the rising tide of community raises all peoples’ boats including mine. The pathway to my fulfillment in life is to serve community.

With this renewed sense of community spirit, my family and I developed what we call the “Natural Courage With Alpacas” program to make a difference among the less fortunate. Two other New Jersey alpaca farms, Alpaca Ridge, LLC and Hidden Pastures, LLC, assisted us with our premiere event in September 2008.



This innovative program is a character building community service event for youth at risk. It is an experience in the power of courage and in building courage from self-confidence and hope with nature's finest – alpacas. It also creates a framework for children to experience enjoyably succeeding, while helping and allowing others to succeed as well.

Six young girls, supervised by the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), and four daughters of my friends participated. The girls were split into two teams.

DYFS removes children from their homes generally due to abuse, neglect, or unresolved emotional issues. They live in group homes run by State or County government or charitable organizations. For security reasons, pictures could not be taken of the DYFS girls. The four daughters were included for pictures and to make the two children teams larger. Accordingly, the pictures published with this article are only of my friends' daughters.

Four alpaca farmers led the two teams, using four super-friendly, in-your-face alpacas. It commenced with all adults and girls forming a big circle, facing one another. To build a sense of community, they introduced themselves and shared something they loved in their lives.



5-year-olds love Houdini, too.

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The girls then entered a pasture where they came face-to-face with the four super-friendly alpacas. They also learned some alpaca history and observed the unique characteristics distinguishing alpacas from other livestock.

After instruction and practice, the girls then led alpacas one-on-one through a simple agility course. Each girl was applauded for her successful completion. The DYFS chaperones were so impressed by the alpacas that they asked to participate in the agility course along with the girls. The chaperones and girls had so much fun they asked to go through the course a second time. We increased the difficulty of the course a little to make this second time more challenging.

Braiding belts from silky soft alpaca yarn ended the 3 1/2-hour-long program. The girls proudly wore their belts home. This program ended with everybody again forming a large circle facing one another. I asked the girls for volunteers to share how they felt about alpacas at the beginning of this program and how they felt at the end. Several girls shared.

When the alpacas first approached, the girls became quiet and wore serious faces. Two actually backed away. As the girls petted and hugged the alpacas, though, conversations started and smiles spread across their faces.



The agility course builds self-confidence.



Top: "Let's go! I'm ready for the jump," says Louis.



Center: At the end of the course, each girl stood with her alpaca for a picture and acknowledgment of her success.

Bottom: Every girl ended the day with a big smile of accomplishment and love for alpacas.

through fear into the loving arms of success and opportunity. Love is more than kindness, sharing, and forgiving. It is the absence of fear!

**MY WIFE, FRIEDA, AND I LOVE** to take alpacas to 4H and other fairs where people are unfamiliar with them. After watching the unique interaction of children with alpacas, I realized alpacas create the perfect setting to experience the power of courage. They are also the perfect vehicle to build courage from self-confidence and hope. Alpacas have a "magic" that grabs your attention and captures your heart. While passersby are drawn to alpacas, their attention and curiosity bringing them closer is frequently replaced with fear when a friendly alpaca notices them and quickly approaches. Large

I was impressed to see the two outwardly apprehensive girls join the others leading alpacas through the agility course. I was really moved when one of these two shared in the circle at the end her initial fear of the approaching alpacas and her subsequent love for alpacas.

At the end of the day, big smiles captured all faces when "alpaca" was mentioned. The alpaca farm leaders, DYFS chaperones and girls unanimously declared this program a resounding success. They felt it worthy of repeating for other children.

Since the initial September 2008 event, I have repeated the program several times for other group home boys and girls. I intend to expand this program to serve an even larger number of youth at risk with an even larger number of alpacas and farmer leaders. I would like this program to go national.

History is a witness to violence frequently being used to resolve differences. Unless somebody intervenes, it will repeat itself over and over, with resultant suffering. Wall Street and corporate

America will never intervene, since there is no profit in curing violence. As a retired New Jersey attorney, I am keenly aware our legal system has been unable to stamp out violence.

Then, there is the global scene. How is international violence stopped?

Since community gives me meaning, I do not survive if society does not survive. I am passionate about reducing violence! The goal of this Natural Courage With Alpacas program is to help reduce youth violence. Violence is an outgrowth of fear. Fear imprisons love, allowing violence to thrive. Courage empowers one to walk



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animals can appear intimidating when they approach you. This is especially true for children about as tall as alpacas. Thus, the Natural Courage With Alpacas program is designed for 11 to 17 year old children. This is so the alpacas are about as tall as they are.

As passersby are encouraged to touch and experience the huggable, teddy-bear-like alpaca, they realize the alpaca approaches not to bite their ear off but rather out of inquisitiveness. This is when the alpaca magic captures their heart. The alpaca magic builds courage that melts fear away, allowing a child's unconditional love to bond with that of the alpaca. This bond empowers children to comfortably guide an alpaca one-on-one with a lead rope through an agility course.

Children experience the growth of self-confidence and hope as they become aware they are no longer a victim of fear. Courage is born at this instant. A big smile of accomplishment emerges. Self-confidence peaks when they experience being a master in the agility course of that which they earlier feared. It is reinforced with successful alpaca belt braiding.

This article is more than about courage, reducing violence, children, and alpacas. It is about inspiring speculation on what is possible in your life and what community means to you.

Make a difference! Let this article move you to make a difference in your community. Pay it forward! Every time people make a difference in your life, thank them by making a difference in the lives of at least two other people. Remember, life is about community.

#### **BE CREATIVE!**

There is no limit to what makes a difference. It can be as simple as

acknowledging another with a "HI" or as involved as your wildest imagination can invent. Anything and everything is possible.

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## It Takes Courage

While fear is a natural survival instinct that commands one to act, it is not necessary or required that people let instinctive fear push them into violence. This program merely shares with children the skill of taking charge of their lives to melt fear so it does not push them into violence. The effectiveness of this program comes from sharing this "melting fear" skill through experiencing it, as opposed to text book learning it.