



History of Safe Haven Llama & Alpaca Sanctuary

When Charlene Hakes (“Char”) purchased her first two llamas in 1990, she had no idea that this action would develop into a full-blown nonprofit sanctuary 14 years later. Based in Corvallis, in the heart of Montana’s Bitterroot Valley, Char initially wanted to raise a couple of llamas for fiber and general enjoyment. Before jumping blindly into ownership, however, she spent nearly two years educating herself on the care and training of llamas, as well as learning about what to look for in terms of fiber, personality and other traits. Then she began scouting out several small herds in the area and finally bought her first two geldings from a commercial pack herd in Stevensville, Montana.

The Early 1990s

This period was marked by a sudden explosion of people purchasing llamas in many parts of the country despite very expensive price tags. A number of large llama ranches even sprung up in the Bitterroot Valley hoping to cash in on the growing demand for certain lineages, qualities and attributes of these popular animals. Char purchased four weanling males from a breeder in the Hamilton area. Meanwhile, other traditional ranchers, retired folks and local animal lovers were also acquiring llamas for a variety of uses, including general enjoyment and handling, packing and/or guarding sheep herds. After only a few years, the appeal of using llama fiber for clothing and crafts picked up, which further heightened interest in llama ownership.

The growing interest in llamas during this period spurred the formation of the Missoula-Bitterroot Llama Club, which enabled llama owners, breeders and others to get together to share information, educate each other and have some fun! As Char – a dog-groomer by trade - was also on the Bitterroot Humane Association Board of Directors, she was instrumental in spearheading the necessary marketing work for the Club and organizing its participation in local fairs, carnivals, parades and fundraisers. Her favorite activity was giving children rides on a couple of her painstakingly-trained llamas who also appeared to enjoy the limelight (plus all the extra treats)! During annual llama and alpaca sales events, Char always immersed herself in all the clinics and seminars she could attend, many led by renowned camelid experts, such as Marty McGee and John Mallon.

The Mid-1990s

By the mid 90s, geldings were averaging \$800 or more and Char was beginning to become recognized as a local llama expert. Her shearing demonstration at a fair in 1994 resulted in an onslaught of calls to have her shear others’ llamas and to provide information on their care, maintenance and handling. Also around this time a few breeders and owners began selling llamas at nominal prices or giving them away for free as sheep guards. The value of llamas plummeted, not only in the Bitterroot Valley, but elsewhere around the country, due to similar devaluing of otherwise excellent stock. As the popularity of llamas declined sharply with the drop in high-dollar sales, the supply of unwanted animals rose dramatically.

In 1996 the biggest llama breeding ranch in the Bitterroot Valley suddenly quit the business and literally “dumped” nearly 40 llamas into the local populace. Other ranches began gradually exiting the breeding business over the next few years, similarly selling off their herds. Unfortunately, the people who acquired these llamas were not educated on proper care and handling. The new owners found their llamas largely unapproachable due to a lack of prior handling and neglect of even the most basic medical attention and grooming care. Most llamas unloaded during this period were also never neutered and the new owners were never advised on how to determine gender, let alone to keep them separated. Unfortunately, the llamas continued breeding (and inbreeding) on their own, further increasing the need for timely intervention! Someone needed to step forward to ensure the wellbeing of this growing stockpile of neglected and abandoned llamas that was being aimlessly dispersed across the entire Bitterroot Valley and beyond.

The Late 1990s

During this radical llama sell-off period, the demand and prices for geldings and then even the females were dropping sharply. Char Hakes became the local “go-to” gal for llama handling and caretaking issues almost overnight. Her experience and passion for llamas only fueled her willingness to help others understand how to provide adequate comfort and security for their newly acquired animals. Char’s sideline shearing business grew steadily and she was often asked to train other owners’ llamas. Some people approached Char with, “if you catch them you can have them”, obviously not interested in keeping or caring for their llamas any longer. She eventually ended up taking in numerous llamas that could not be sold in the declining marketplace – or that would otherwise be sold to packing plants. Hence, an unplanned, timely sanctuary was in the making, run solely by the “go-to” gal and supported by her own personal resources. Char explored forming a nonprofit sanctuary in an effort to lay the foundation for outside financial assistance, but was consistently discouraged for inexplicable reasons. Sadly, perhaps it was because llamas – considered neither pets nor livestock - have been unable to capture the attention or concern of traditional humane organizations.

2000 to Present

Upon learning of Char’s plight in 2003, one of her regular dog grooming clients offered to help establish legal nonprofit status for Char’s growing llama rescue operation. *Safe Haven Llama & Alpaca Sanctuary* became an official 501(c)(3) in March 2004, finally filling a key niche in the interest of animal welfare. At last the unwanted, neglected and abandoned llamas – many of which have been passed around again and again among various owners - would have a place to call their own and would receive the medical and grooming care they desperately needed. Because of Char’s experience with the growth and decline of the llama market, she had the foresight to include alpacas, a cousin of the llama, in the name of the sanctuary. While alpacas have not yet reached the decline in prices of llamas, she wanted to prepare for such an occurrence, should it come to pass.

To this day, *Safe Haven* has operated on a shoestring budget based on donations and often subsidized by Char's own financial support. But her dream to provide a quality refuge for the surplus of unwanted llamas is gradually being fulfilled. Similarly, Char's passion for educating people of all ages on the intricacies, nuances and many wonderful qualities these animals possess is flourishing. Through her dedicated efforts, the following noteworthy accomplishments have already been realized:

- A Board of Directors was established to help carry out the mission of *Safe Haven*.
- Over 200 llamas and 19 alpacas have been given a second chance to live a peaceful, healthy life since the late 1990's.
- The rate of inbreeding among llama herds has been significantly reduced in the Bitterroot Valley.
- Numerous owners have been trained to handle their llamas and provide proper care.
- At least 50 previously unhandled llamas can now be haltered, led and groomed.
- A number of serious medical issues have been addressed, giving the "patients" improved quality of life.
- Numerous crias (we've lost count) from llamas that were already bred at the time of surrender have been successfully raised and handled at appropriate stages.
- Over 100 llamas and 5 alpacas traumatized by various events, such as wolf attacks, dog attacks, owner abuse, extreme cold, and malnourishment, have been rescued and given proper medical treatment, plus a loving, supportive environment.
- About 20 llamas and 15 alpacas have been adopted out to new homes, following a thorough review of prospective caretaking abilities and an orientation program to ensure that the new owners can effectively handle the animals and meet their basic needs.
- A handful of "brave" women were taught how to create fine crafts and products out of processed llama fiber in an effort to generate more public awareness of how easy and fun working with fiber can be. More educational opportunities like this will definitely be offered in the future.
- Nine young adults enthusiastically fulfilled their community service obligations by helping Char care for, walk and clean up after the *Safe Haven* llamas – little did they expect to learn so much and to thoroughly enjoy the experience!
- Increased awareness of the llama dilemma, and the potential for the same outcome for alpacas, is constantly being generated through *Safe Haven's* dedicated marketing efforts, presence at public events, word of mouth and a handful of curious journalists and students who use a variety of media to get the story out
- Ranch tours and school/group visits have been a rewarding experience for all concerned - *Safe Haven* Board Members encourage groups of all ages to schedule a first-hand visit of their own.
- A guard llama was leased to a ranch as a seeing-eye companion to a lonely, elderly, blind ewe who had just lost her longtime partner. The llama and ewe both became instant buddies and were doing extremely well until the sheep eventually died a few weeks later.