

**Blind sheep depends on seeing eye llama**  
by PERRY BACKUS - Ravalli Republic



Hanna the sheep and NC the llama spend their days together. NC acts as a seeing eye llama for Hannah who is virtually blind.

Photo by PERRY BACKUS - Ravalli Republic

VICTOR - Hanna's been lost ever since the day the Colonel died. Standing just outside a rickety barbwire fence, Marla Mahoney shakes her head sadly as she watches the elderly ewe stumble hard as it tries to navigate a ditch and then walk headlong into a fence post.

"Poor old Hanna," Mahoney says. "She and the Colonel were a pair."

Hanna and the Colonel were the last of a flock that Mahoney's father gathered together over the years and raised on this small piece of ground just north of Victor. Last year, when it came time to shear the woolly beasts, they noticed that Hanna was virtually blind.

"The Colonel became her eyes," Mahoney said. "She followed him around with her nose on his rump. They were inseparable."

That is until six weeks ago, when the Colonel laid down and died.

"She was just lost. I felt so bad for her," Mahoney said. "We just couldn't bring ourselves to put

her down without at least giving it a try.”

“It” turned out to be a tall dark gray llama named NC.

Mahoney had heard that llamas can be a good companion for sheep. Many people use the animals to guard their flocks against dogs and coyotes. She hoped that maybe a llama could serve as a seeing eye companion for Hanna.

So she picked up the telephone and called Char Hakes of the Safe Haven and Alpaca Sanctuary just outside of Corvallis.

Hakes thought immediately of NC.

The gelding spent his first bit of life in the company of sheep. His owners decided they didn’t want him and traded him off to Hakes in exchange for a female llama. Over the years, Hakes had seen NC chase off dogs and hang around sheep whenever he had the chance.

The longtime llama fan also had a theory she’d been anxious to test for years.

“I knew that llamas would make a great seeing eye companion for a long time,” Hakes said. “I’ve just never had a chance to try it out. And so when I got the call, I immediately thought ‘oh, do I have a great one for you.’”

She brought NC by Mahoney’s place two weeks ago Sunday.

The two critters became best of buddies almost immediately.

“They were absolutely the perfect match,” Mahoney said.

Hanna the sheep stays close to her new guide as they while away the day in the couple acres enclosed by barbwire. They sleep next to each other under a small roof that juts out from the edge of the barn. Hanna still has trouble navigating the ditches and sometimes has problems with stray fence posts and other obstacles scattered here and there.

But when the barnyard bullies come into view, she no longer has to worry.

“The deer were so aggressive with Hanna,” Mahoney said. “They would push her away from the feed trough and eat all her hay. He’s put the run on them. That doesn’t happen anymore.”

Hakes hopes that more people will see that llamas can be useful in a variety of ways. Besides their companionship, the animals can be good packers, guards and their wool is valuable.

“There’s too many people who just don’t value them at all,” she said.

Hakes takes in unwanted llamas and alpacas at her sanctuary. She currently is housing 35 animals.

“They are eating us out of house and home,” Hakes said. “We’ve been feeding three tons a month just for the boys. And we’re taking in more animals all the time because of the economy.

“We can use whatever help people can give us,” she said.

Anyone wanting to learn more about the sanctuary can call Hakes at 961-4027.

Maybe there’s another blind critter out there in need of a good seeing eye llama.

“I know I couldn’t be happier for Hanna,” Mahoney said. “They’ve been just great together. He’s so good to her.”

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### **Reader's Comments >>**

John Mills wrote on Feb 18, 2009 7:57 PM:

" Having known Marla Mahoney for a number of years now, it is unlikely you will find anyone with a bigger heart when it comes to doing the right thing for someone else. I do speak from personal experience - for what it is worth. A great article by Mr. Backus!! "

Laurie Riley wrote on Feb 18, 2009 3:07 PM:

" Thank you, Perry, for writing a story with such an upbeat theme. Hopefully this story will lead to new homes for llamas in need. And thanks to Marla and Char for being such a loving people. "