

Kathy & I had the tremendous good fortune of meeting Jerry & Lynne Braatz, owners of Jersey Breeders Alpaca Farm, located in Tabernacle, NJ, when Kathy & I attended first, their 2013 Fall Open House & then subsequently, their “Alpaca Toolbox”, a one-day seminar that Jerry created and both present, dedicated to teaching prospective alpaca owners about the various aspects of the industry.

During the week following the open house, Jerry & I met for lunch and we agreed to my joining their farm as a barn hand. I loved the animals and very much looked forward to going to work every day!

Almost a year passed, after which time Jerry presented Kathy & I with a rather unique opportunity to create our own farm. After a couple of months back and forth pondering the pros and cons, we accepted.

Kathy & I didn't enter into the alpaca farm business in the typical fashion in that we didn't buy a pregnant dam. Instead, Jerry offered us the opportunity to “rent a womb”/breed a dam – specifically for the cria. We were able to select from several females; we ultimately chose a maiden named Delilah and we bred her to a sire named Aerosmith.

Fast forward to a sunny Sunday afternoon, shortly after 1pm on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when we officially became alpaca owners as we welcomed our very First animal, a female cria, to this planet!

There'd really never been a doubt in my mind that we were going to have a girl! The name had been chosen long before the actual arrival ... she was named Maggie after my grandmother.

The birth process itself went relatively smoothly. Obvious signs of labor started mid-morning and the cria was on the ground by 1:15p. She was a vibrant, by all appearances healthy, beautiful little fawn colored girl.

I worked at the farm five days a week and so I had the opportunity to watch our cria grow. And grow she did! Maggie grew quickly and we couldn't have been more pleased! Delilah was a tremendous mom as she was attentive and a good milk producer. Just prior to her 90<sup>th</sup> day, Maggie was already 50 pounds!

The “Choke Event” ....

On a **very** cold Thursday morning this past February I went to work, and by all appearances everything seemed fine with both Maggie, with her mom and with the rest of the main herd. I left the farm for a morning business breakfast meeting at a diner nearby and returned about an hour or so later.

When I returned, I quickly got back into my clean-up routine. When I got to the pen where the main herd was located ... and where our Maggie was ... I noticed that Maggie had what seemed to be along the lines of “snot” beneath her nostrils.

Other than it appeared rather suddenly, Maggie appeared to be acting normally and so after consulting with Jerry, we decided to see how she was doing the following morning.

I'm off work on Fridays but Jerry contacted me very early and advised that we reach out to a vet for assistance as it wasn't looking good. It was so cold that Jerry and Angela had been forced to cut off ice chunks as Maggie'd been dunking her entire face for water.

Now of course as luck would have it ... the first vet I reached out to was away at a conference ... the next one was able to do a farm visit but not until 3p that afternoon. We waited .... and time passed .... and we waited some more. Time never goes so slowly as when you desperately need something to happen!

The vet arrived onsite as promised around 3p and after taking a couple of x-rays, there appeared to be no obvious anomalies, but Maggie was definitely dehydrated and they were unsuccessful in sticking a vein for a blood draw nor to set up supplemental fluids.

Arrangements were made to put Maggie in the back seat of my Ford Focus and drive her to the New Bolton Large Animal Veterinary Hospital – part of the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary program – located in Kennett Sq, PA, a little over an hour away on a “good day”.

Overall, I felt fairly calm ... but of course my mind was all over the place. Fortunately for me, a good friend, drove along with me ... hitting the road on a cold, snowy Friday evening around 6p and getting to New Bolton around 8p.

The students and staff on-call that evening were in fact waiting for Maggie to arrive. I must say that in spite of the upset of the moment, the people that I dealt with were friendly and kept me informed/involved and they were doing everything in their power to save our cria.

They immediately set to work shaving her neck in an attempt to find a vein by which they could administer fluids and/or meds and a spot on her side for x-rays. A portable x-ray machine was set up but yielded no answers. For close to the first hour, everyone was confounded by the mystery of what was wrong!!

The Vet in charge, Dr. Maya XXX, seemed knowledgeable and made quick decisions. Finally, she came to me and said that typically they wouldn't scope such a young animal but since she was otherwise hearty and healthy, would I be okay if they did that as their likely last resort. I told her, “By all means, go for it! If we don't find the issue, we're going to lose her anyway.” I was already prepared for that possibility and I was even going to arrange to have them shear her if we lost her.

Dr. Maya took the lighted scope and inserted it down Maggie's throat ... & within seconds the blockage was immediately recognizable ... a really Large acorn!! Fortunately, Dr. Maya was able to push the blockage through and into Maggie's first cavity as removal would have caused more throat damage & pain.

After things quieted and she seemed to stabilize, Maggie was moved to a heated barn stall where oxygen and fluids/meds were administered. The first night was critical and Dr. Maya even slept with Maggie. Dr. Maya told me early Saturday morning that twice we almost lost her but fortunately, thanks to the loving and capable hands of Dr. Maya and the New Bolton staff, Jersey Breeder's staff & friends, as well as Maggie's sheer will, she made it through! We visited her both days over the weekend and she was released on Monday with both an antibiotic and “throat coat”, to return to the farm.

We loaded up into my Focus and made the trek back to the farm in Tabernacle, NJ. Of course a concern now was would mom, Delilah, accept her cria back to nurse? We separated the two of them from the main herd at the recommendation of New Bolton ... and fortunately, Delilah did take Maggie back! It is highly likely that mom's gesture had a Huge impact on Maggie's overall recovery and continued good health!

Ultimately, Maggie had gone for 36+ hours with little to no hydration due to the choke blockage. That alone is enough to put a healthy animal down for the count. We will be forever grateful that she had the “will to live”! We

joked around after the crisis had passed that Maggie simply didn't want to sleep out in the freezing cold so she opted for a spa weekend as a way to sleep in a heated barn!

Both Life & Nature are funny/fickle things ... never to be taken lightly!

Today, Maggie is a healthy, 100 lb., one-year old female.

Since Maggie's choke episode, and because we'd already bred Delilah for another cria, when the opportunity arose to purchase Delilah, we did. And just last month, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, we welcomed our second female cria to this world. Again, another hearty and healthy beautiful animal.

And now Kathy & I, & Sweet Surrender Farm ~ Alpacas & Gardens, LLC, officially have our own base herd and are embarking on the next exciting chapter in our lives.

Lessons learned!

Remember ... Alpacas are Very stoic animals! They'll "be strong" ... until they can no longer! Bear in mind that no one knows your animals better than you ((or the people you have handling them for you)).

Trust your instincts ... and at the same time try not to panic when something out of the ordinary occurs.

& finally, surround yourself with a *minimum* of one knowledgeable alpaca person to mentor you through the difficult times. Our experience so far is that most alpaca farmers are more than happy to help if they can!

From Sweet Surrender Farm to your farms .... May we All be blessed with a remarkable year in 2017!!