

Carrying on Family's Tradition of Farming

Daughter Trades in Her City Life to Raise Alpacas

By Ovetta Wiggins
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, October 25, 2007; T01

Photography by Katherine Frey
Washington Post Photographer



A family tobacco farm has been turned into the oldest and largest alpaca and llama farm in Southern Maryland, recognized by Gov. Martin O'Malley (D).

Angel Forbes Simmons was a bona fide city girl.

Born and reared in Miami Beach, all she knew was the fast-paced world of cosmopolitan living. That all changed 11 years ago when she moved to the 18th-century Victorian Gothic home in Aquasco where her mother, Mittie Forbes Simmons, was born.

The city girl traded in her briefcase and took the helm of her family's 46-acre Villa de Alpacas Farm, the oldest and largest alpaca and llama farm in Maryland.

Forbes Simmons was one of six farmers recognized Oct. 2 by Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) for their commitment to farming. All the farms -- hers, plus two in Caroline, one in Talbot and two in Wicomico counties -- have been family businesses for more than 100 years.

"If someone told me 20 years ago that I'd be raising alpacas, I never would have believed them," said Forbes Simmons, 43, who used to supervise medical photographers at a hospital.



Alpacas and llamas graze on the 46 acre Villa de Alpacas Farm in Aquasco. A tobacco barn in the background is reminiscent of the farm's old days. The farm has been a family business for more than 200 years.



Forbes Simmons kisses Mosby, a valuable suri llama.





Alpacas and llamas love to roll in the dirt. “It’s the camel in them,” she says.



“They are like dogs. They are very smart,” Angel Forbes Simmons said. Alpacas, which are cousins to the llama, produce a fine, cashmere-like fleece.

She gave up the idea of buying a Volkswagen Cabrio convertible when she realized it didn't fit with her new lifestyle. Instead, she drives a Honda Element SUV that is big enough to transport the passive, long-neck, sheep-like animals.

The bulging-eyed alpacas, which produce a fine, cashmere-like fleece, are cousins to the llama, which Forbes Simmons also raises. The alpacas were first imported into the United States in 1984 from Chile and later Peru.

The family farm dates to 1802, when a grandfather purchased it to grow tobacco and raise horses. Forbes Simmons's mother worked on the farm as a child but moved to Florida after getting married. She inherited the property in 1959, rented out the house and left her brother, Bobby Forbes, in charge of the farm, by then a producer of tobacco, corn and soybeans.

In 1996, Forbes had a heart attack, and the city girl realized it was time to move to the farm. Angel Forbes Simmons relocated to Aquasco and immersed herself in learning the family business.

Two years later, her parents joined her in Prince George's County when her father became ill with Parkinson's disease. Helping her mother care for him from afar had become too hard.

"We had to do something," Forbes Simmons said.

During that time, Mittie Forbes Simmons, 76, was fielding letters from developers interested in buying her property. Such proposals had flowed into her mailbox for years. One builder suggested using the Victorian house, which is filled with family pictures, as a clubhouse and building houses on the rest of the property.

But she was adamant about keeping the farm in the family. Her siblings had sold their parcels.

"I always wanted to save it for my daughter," she said.

But there was a problem: Her daughter didn't know a thing about farming. So Angel Forbes Simmons, who wears a gold and silver bangle with designs of alpacas, said she hit the books, researching everything she could about what she could till or raise on the land.

She thought about buffalo. There is a market for the meat, but she had an aversion to slaughtering animals. She considered growing shiitake mushrooms, ginseng, organic vegetables and herbs, flowers, even tea. With the house on the property listed on the National Register of Historic Places, she thought she could market the tea as "American tea."

She continued exploring other options and, she said, "alpacas just seemed like the perfect fit."

No slaughtering would be involved. It wouldn't require buying a lot of farming equipment. And the docile animals would be easy for her to handle.

So, in 1999, the year her father died, Forbes Simmons turned the family business primarily into an alpaca farm, which she operated alone until two years ago when she married. She shears the fiber, and the fleece is used for shawls and capes that sell for as much as \$189.

The farm's profit comes from selling the livestock. A female alpaca can sell easily for \$9,000, Forbes Simmons said. Some people will buy alpacas as pets for \$1,000.

"You don't get as much for the boys," she said.

And the last five births on the farm have been male alpacas.

"I call it the law of the alpacas," she said.

On a recent day, Forbes Simmons opened the fence to where alpacas rolled in the dirt and ate hay. She pointed to a large, white-haired female that had just finished eating.



"Come here, Bonquita," she said, as if she were calling one of her dogs.

Bonquita wandered over.

"They are like dogs," Forbes Simmons said. "They are very smart."

The one-time city girl now knows the names of each of the 96 animals in her herd. She said she has to because, as a breeder, she has to register each animal with its pedigree.

She realizes, too, that she is part of a growing industry. In 1996, the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association had 1,000 members; in 2004, it had 4,000.

"Alpacas are in vogue," she said.

For information on alpacas, visit <http://www.marylandalpaca.com>.