

To Raise Children Right, Have Them Raise Alpacas

■ Tribal member Barbara Mercier's children learning the lessons of life.

By Ron Karten

Tribal member Barbara Mercier was worried about giving her children the right lessons of growing up. "I was struggling," she said, "how am I going to teach my kids a work ethic?"

As the youngest of eight kids, she never had to look far for babysitting opportunities and the responsibilities that came with the job.

"At 12," she recalled, "Mom said, 'This is the last time I'm buying you clothes.'"

By the time she hit high school, she was holding down housekeeping jobs for motels on the coast. "You can't do that today," she said.

So for her children — Winston, 13, Tami and Seth, both 12 — she settled on a program that can reward the children for raising alpacas, and at the same time, teach them the dual responsibilities of caring for animals and keeping books on a business.

Of course, Barbara is handling the books to start with, but the chance for the kids to grow and learn from the process is enormous.

Seth now is interested in starting a website for the business. To start with, said Barbara, the kids will join existing associations "to get out there."

The opportunity came to Mercier from a program of the federal Department of Agriculture (DA)

as \$5,000 available, Mercier picked up on the alpaca business after seeing a television advertisement about alpacas.

These programs have been available in rural areas for many years, said Maria Godines, a Warm Springs Tribal member and Indian Credit Outreach Liaison for the state. She began targeting loan opportunities to Native American communities of the nine federally recognized Tribes in the state this year.

The Mercier family was her first applicant for the rural loans, though federal programs make other opportunities available to fill a variety of rural and agricultural needs (See the website at www.indiancreditoutreach.com).

"A lot of people are not aware of what the Farm Service Agency has to offer," said Godines.

Mercier first learned that alpacas can be a complicated and expensive business. Money can be made by clipping and selling the fleece once each year, by breeding and selling animals and by putting the males out for stud.

On the other hand, alpacas are easy to care for and pleasant to work with. Also, said Mercier, "They have two toes, not hooves, so they are easy on the ground."

With all that in mind, Mercier found a package deal in which she and the kids received a pregnant female, maiden female, herd-sired male and a gelded male for \$17,250. Each of the kids was approved for a \$5,000 loan and Mercier chipped in \$2,500 for the effort. Each loan has a six-year maturation with interest payments due beginning in 2004.

Of two breeds available, the Merciers bought Huacayas. Upkeep takes about 15 minutes a day, said Mercier. That includes feeding them every day, working them with a halter and trimming their toe nails.

"You have to halter them at least once a week to get them used to it," said Tami.

"(An alpaca called) Wanda was the easiest to clip her toenails," said Seth.

"Sometimes they're gonna be fighting," said Winston.

The animals are shy and gentle, though they sometimes spit at each other, said Mercier. Weighing in at about 180 pounds, they are man-



Photos by Ron Karten

Friendly Exchange — Tami George feeds her alpaca named Lacey on the family's property in Grand Ronde. The family business of raising alpacas is one way to make some money and learn responsibility.

ageable and still very "curious about kids."

The 11-month breeding process has already produced a baby female the family named, "Sprite." By the end of November, the family figures, "Sprite" will be weaned and the momma Alpaca, "Lacey," will be ready to breed again.

"One thing that really truly amazes me," said Godines, "is to see parents out there like Barbara. It is great to see a parent like that, keeping the kids out of trouble, all just dedicated that their youth make it when they become adults."

Since the Mercier family was approved for their loans, Godines has funded three other business plans with two more applications in process. "And several others are working on the process."

The family has found that the entire alpaca community is "supportive" of their efforts, and almost all the learning comes from others in this specialized community. In March, for example, the family will attend an alpaca show in Albany to "learn more about the fiber aspect," said Mercier.

All of which adds up to a great hobby for the family, and a great way to ease into the "R" word (responsibility!) for the kids. Just so long as the alpacas don't get away again. Oh, did I forget to mention that little adventure?

Mercier, Executive Assistant to Tribal General Manager Cliff Adams, is the daughter of Darrel and the late Ruth Mercier and granddaughter of Hubert and the late Martha Hudson Mercier. One of eight children, Mercier's sisters are Connie Lopez, Carmen Pearsall and Margo Mercier. Her brothers are Mark, Lowell, Doug and John Mercier. ■



Fun On The Farm — Tribal member Barbara Mercier's children — Winston (13), Seth (12) and Tami (12) from left to right, are raising alpacas on the family farm. The animals produce fleece and can be bred to make money. The Mercier children have become part of an alpaca community with others who raise the likeable animals.

made available through the Tribe's former Small Business program. Specifically, she tapped into the Rural Youth Loans program of the DA's Farm Service Agency. With a potential loan of as much



Lights Of Sound — Native American flutist Ward Stroud was part of the lineup at the Chemawa concert.



Synergy — Gary Small, (right) rocked the students at Chemawa with his high-energy show that has garnered him critical acclaim across the Nation.

The Gary Small band, along with other Native performers, hosted a free concert — the 3rd Annual Chemawa Indian School Benefit Concert at Chemawa on Friday, November 21 in honor of Native American Awareness Month. Small, who recently was awarded "Songwriter of the Year" for his "Wild Indians" album. Several hundred people attended the show which was broadcast live by KBOO radio of Portland.

Photos by Peta Tinda