

LIFE 2.0 | from suburbanites to ALPACA FARMERS

by REBECCA GILL

ARE YOU going through a midlife crisis? Is someone sick? Is something wrong? These are the questions friends and family asked when we announced we were selling off everything we owned to move north and start a farm.

To many people, the idea sounded completely crazy, but to us, it was a purposeful decision to push for change and an opportunity to create a “Life 2.0” adventure. And so began the transition from suburbanites to alpaca farmers.

CRITICAL PIVOTS

In my life, I’ve had a few critical pivots. When I was eleven, I proactively left home to become a ward of the state of Michigan. I knew it was the best chance I had for securing a better tomorrow. I later pivoted to put myself through college and I loaded up on student loans so I could have a chance at a good job and career once complete. Once I was out of college, I made sure I overperformed at any job I secured. I did this with purpose and with the hope of pivoting myself into the ideal career path. I longed for the financial security and emotional wellness I did not have as a child.

Growing up in uncertainty produced a survival instinct and a constant quest for a regular paycheck that could afford a warm place to stay and food in my belly. Each pivot in my life trended toward pursuing this goal of protection.

That security was wiped away when we decided to move north. I could still work remotely in digital marketing, but the security my husband Jason’s paycheck brought would no longer be present. Having Jason retire early violated everything within me to seek out that proven source of money, food and shelter.

And yet, somehow, it felt right down to my core. It was another pivot I knew was needed and one I was ready to gamble on.

A FAMILY VOTE

Six years ago, Jason and I took a family vote. Our daughter Ally was leaving for the University of Florida and our son Hunter was failing in the fast speed of a large middle school, the suburbs, and expectations of nonstop extracurricular activities. We asked Hunter what he thought of moving north and starting a farm. He was quick to opt in and was as eager for change as we were.

We finished off the renovation of our lake house in Hale, we



spruced up our primary home in Commerce Township, we consulted with our financial advisor and we started digging through the MLS listings and Grand Traverse property records for open land to purchase. The small town of Buckley was our preference since it already included Jason’s large group of aunts, uncles and cousins.

It took us a year to find a 27-acre parcel that was located on the border of Buckley and Thompsonville. As soon as we found it, we put in a cash offer and put our Hale home up for sale. We drew up plans for our farmhouse and started to seek a builder to help deliver our dream of Life 2.0.

NORTHERN MICHIGAN MAGIC

We had little luck finding a builder and we started to get very frustrated. Then small-town life kicked in and the Cadillac Home Depot recommended we reach out to the Sebring family who delivered tenfold. From my vintage-looking tile to my custom fireplace mantel made out of 100-year-old barn wood from Buckley, Randy Sebring and his sons created a farmhouse we would cherish.

As our house was wrapping up, our downstate friends and family still were not on board. They all still thought we were crazy and they could not grasp why we were moving north.

Prior to moving into our new home, Jason and his Buckley family built our first barn on the property. It was a double-story red barn that looked like it was as vintage as my mantel. I loved the look but was amazed at the size. I never thought we would come close to filling it. Oh, was I wrong.

Push forward three more years and that barn is full. We built another large barn last year and we have two smaller barns for overflow. And somehow, we still never have enough room to house our livestock, hay, and equipment.

FALLING FOR ALPACAS

What I didn’t realize was that I was going to fall head over heels in love with alpacas. I didn’t know that my original purchase of five alpacas would quickly grow into sixty. I didn’t know we would have baby alpacas running around and we’d be an interim home for alpacas needing new families.

There was a lot I didn’t know back then and a lot I still don’t know today. The city girl in me still conflicts with the farmer, but the farmer rises to the occasion and that sense of survival kicks in. The difference is now my need for survival has been extended to include me, my family and my alpaca herd.

Everyone who visits our active farm and store asks how we decided on raising alpacas. And while I can’t remember how we started talking about camelids, I can tell you my core knew an alpaca farm was the right decision. A random stop at an alpaca farm near Cadillac was all it took for me to fall in love with these animals and know they were an important part of our Life 2.0 adventure.

We’re on year three of our new life and our downstate friends and family finally see what

we did. They see the change in me, Jason, and Hunter. They see the happiness and peace we have and they see the happiness our farm brings to others. They finally get it.

LIFE 2.0

We have an active farm with weekend tours for the public and a farm store full of alpaca goods. Each weekend my husband takes families through our farm tours to talk about our adventure in farming, teach them about alpacas, and introduce them to the unconditional love alpacas offer. While he does his tour, I stand at the store window watching. The huge smiles and sounds of laughter validate our deep love for alpacas and our decision to leave our old life behind.

As people leave the farm, they often thank me for letting them onto our property and into our home. The reality is, I should be thanking them for welcoming us, financially supporting our business, and for helping us achieve that Life 2.0 adventure we so desperately needed.

I’ve gone from speaking at conferences to holding an alpaca’s head as we struggle through a difficult birth. My Egyptian cotton sheets are now used for alpaca births. At the end of each day, my feet are dirty and my hair smells of the alpacas I loved on. I’ve packed up my business suits and replaced them with barn boots

and alpaca socks that help me manage through the Northern Michigan winters. I’ve said goodbye to my quest for security and I’ve opened myself up to a rich life full of barns, hay, and alpaca kisses.

In my life, I’ve had moments of extreme certainty that something was just right. It’s an instinctual feeling that I feel at my core. Moving north and starting our alpaca farm were both decisions that needed no thought, discussion, or deliberation. At my core, I knew they were the right thing for me and my family. Moving north brought color to a black and white life. I feel like I can breathe in fully and without reservation.

I don’t think this change came from wide-open spaces and fresh country air. People create change, and in this case, Northern Michigan people. It’s the Home Depot worker who helped us find a builder, it’s our neighbor Jet who jumps in to clean out barn stalls and it’s Jason’s family who gathers their tractors to help clear hundreds of trees off of our land.

Moving north brought love, kindness and an appreciation for what really matters in life. It’s brought everything I had hoped for and a lot more that I didn’t even realize I was seeking.

For the first time in my life, I no longer think about the security of a paycheck or worry about controlling my destiny. My Life 2.0 adventure keeps me centered and grounded, which allows me to worry less and experience more. It’s brought an amazing gift of coffee in the pasture, sunsets on the front porch, and a sense of peace in my soul.

“My Egyptian cotton sheets are now used for alpaca births.”



Rebecca Gill and her husband own and operate an alpaca farm in Thompsonville, Michigan. Cotton Creek Farms raises alpacas, offers weekly farm tours, and operates an onsite farm store at www.cottoncreekfarms.com.