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Therapy by Alpaca

New York mental-health provider Andrus is using the soft, woolly creatures to help traumatized children



Zingaro, center, one of the three alpacas recently been acquired by Andrus, a New York nonprofit that provides programs for children with emotional or behavioral challenges, nuzzles Jimmy Ng. The 11-year-old is one of several students from the Orchard School visiting the animals for the first time, at Andrus's Yonkers campus. Andrus, which runs the Orchard School, located on its campus, recently acquired the alpacas to use with sheep and goats to help quell aggression and improve social skills in the school's children by having them care for the animals. Alpacas have been found to be outgoing and intelligent and

perfect therapy. *CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **PATRICE O'SHAUGHNESSY**

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Amadeo, Phoenix and Zingaro waited patiently on the new pasture created for them on the sloping green campus of Andrus, a mental-health provider based in Westchester County.

The creatures looked on as a dozen eager children came down the path, led by 11-year-old **Fallon Demers** carrying a sign reading "Welcome Alpacas."

Fallon Demers, 11, holds a welcome sign while making her way to visit the new alpacas for the first time with other students at the Orchard School.



The alpacas are the newest addition to a stable of therapy animals used at Andrus to help children who have suffered severe trauma, stress and other emotional-health issues, as well as children with autism and ADHD. They were introduced to each other last week.

Although dogs and other animals have been used in therapy and in assisted activities for years, alpacas and their cousins, llamas, known for their calm disposition, are increasingly being deployed for this task.

Zingaro checks out a visitor.



Fallon, meanwhile, worried that the hay-munching alpacas might try to eat her ponytail. **Josh Maxwell, 11, Joshua Perdomo, 12, Jake McMahon, 14,** and Manny Hernandez, 11, stood still as instructed, their hands clasped and faces somber, as Zingaro strode over to sniff them.

The other two alpacas stayed away, bleating, but Jake noted that little Amadeo “is making eye contact!”



Zingaro nuzzles Joshua Maxwell, 11, as he and fellow students Richard Pierce, second from right, and Manny Hernandez from the Orchard School at Andrus, visit the alpacas.

Next, **Jimmy Ng, 11,** took his turn. He stood with a stiff smile, then grinned when Zingaro came to him and planted a kiss on the boy’s forehead. They stood like that for a few moments as the other children oohed and aahed. Jimmy wiped alpaca saliva off his glasses and giggled.

Bryan Murphy, chief executive of Andrus, said animal therapy is “paying tremendous dividends to our children. They’re taking care of something, connecting to the earth, learning about sustainability.”

He said having the alpacas join the dogs, sheep, goats and chickens for therapy is bringing Andrus back to its roots.

The 107-acre campus in Yonkers was originally a working farm. John Emory Andrus founded an orphanage there in 1928 and added Tudor-style mansions for the children to live in.

About half of the 150 children at Andrus, who are between the ages 6 and 18, live in the Tudor residences, and the other half are day students who come from New York City, Long Island and as far away as upstate. They aren’t able to function in a regular school and struggle with managing their emotions. Andrus also serves about 2,500 children in the tri-state area in clinics and other settings.

The children already play with and walk Cricket, a King Charles Spaniel rescued from abuse and neglect, and two other dogs. They feed the farm animals, collect eggs and help shear the sheep. In May, they will help shear the alpacas and spin out the wool. They also participate in equine therapy at a horse farm upstate.



Zingaro, one of three alpacas acquired by Andrus.

“Using the animals, the children talk in metaphor about their own lives,” said **Siobhan Masterson**, senior director of campus programs. “And studies have shown there is a physical impact. Being with an animal raises the level of oxytocin,” referring to the hormone that produces feelings of satisfaction.

The children had been prepped for weeks about the first encounter. “It couldn’t have gone better,” said **Carter Kahle**, director of the clinical program for day students, as she shepherded the children back to their classrooms.

Amadeo, a 3-year-old alpaca with a dark brown fleece; Phoenix, 5, velvety black; and Zingaro, a gray 6-year-old who lived up to his nickname “The Mayor,” were born and raised on **Faraway Farm** in Yorktown Heights by **Leda Blumberg** and her husband, **Steve Cole**. They answered the children’s questions, such as “Do alpacas spit?” (Yes.) “Can I ride on them?” (No.)



Fleece harvested from the new alpacas.

The couple started breeding alpacas for the touchable fleece, but found the animals served another purpose: They relieve stress.

Leda Blumberg, of Faraway Farm Alpacas, with Zingaro, center, and Phoenix, left.



Ms. Blumberg knew Zingaro and his buddies would fit in at Andrus. “I thought I’d be sad when we dropped them off,” she said, “but the children will give them a beautiful home here.”