

Longtime PLTA member and certifier Kurt Pihera died on May 5. Kurt and Karen, his wife of 27 years, had a llama farm in Ball Ground, Georgia. Kurt was also a member of the Southern States Llama Association and for many years provided the obstacles at llama shows across the southeastern region. A memorial celebration of his life was held on June 13 at Willow Tree Farm in Ringgold, GA. He will be sorely missed. —Susan Gawarecki

THE STORY OF KAREN & KURT

By Karen Pihera

THE PRIEST AT KURT'S MEMORIAL CELEBRATION said it was not appropriate for me to get up and talk, so I didn't. But now I want to share a bit about Kurt's and my lives together.

Kurt and I had pig roasts annually on my birthday for about 10 years. The barbeque at his celebration was in remembrance of those good times.

I met Kurt in 1983 when he was dating a vet tech I worked with at one of my first jobs in practice. He and the tech got married, and for the next four years, we double dated, and went to a lot of the same parties and events. After four years, they divorced. I never thought his first wife appreciated him nearly enough. I thought he was not only beautiful but sweet and kind and funny—he made me laugh at myself. He was generous to a fault, which seems to be a Pihera trait. He couldn't say no to anyone about anything, which was in my favor when I asked him if he would ever want to marry me and he said yes.

But before that, after his divorce, he needed a friend, and we spent lots of time together talking and not dating. I didn't want to be the rebound girlfriend, so wherever we went and whatever we did, I'd remind him this was not a date, we were just friends. Finally, we went on a campout together, where all our friends bailed at the last minute, leaving just the two of us heading into the wilderness.

When we set up camp, I insisted we set up two tents since we were just friends. By the end of the weekend, we were in the same tent and more than friends. We got married in 1988 and set about spending as much time in the great outdoors as we could. We both worked hard at jobs we loved and played hard in our time off. One weekend when I was at a veterinary seminar, Kurt built us a moon deck on our roof. We spent nearly as many nights up there sleeping under the stars as we did in our own bed. We hiked, camped, and backpacked in the Cohutta and Pisgah Wildernesses, on Cumberland Island, in Colorado, the Teton and Idaho. We canoe camped in the Okefenokee Swamp, down the Suwanee River, the Everglades and St Joseph's Peninsula in the Gulf of Mexico.

We went to Peru twice and hiked the Inca Trail. On the fifth day of that hike, we came through the Sun Gate into Machu Picchu at sunrise, and had the place to ourselves until the first tourist buses arrived hours later. We went to Africa, saw lions mating, and climbed 2/3 of the way up Mount Kilimanjaro.

Kurt and I hiked up to Mt LeConte Lodge in the Smokies at least eight times. On one of those earlier trips, we saw our first working llama train. The Lodge uses llamas to restock supplies all summer long. Kurt and I got our first two llamas in 1993 to carry our own camping gear (and so I could learn to doctor them).

Then we got more llamas, then had our first baby cria in 1995. This was White Lightning, who was so good at all things llama that he got us into every aspect of the llama world there was. Kurt and Lightning had quite a bond—Lightning would do most anything for Kurt, and they did well at shows and PR events together. It was awful when Lightning died last fall and Kurt cried like a baby.

Probably the best part of the llama world has been the people. Llamas attract the nicest humans, and we've made many great and lasting friendships over the past 20 years.

Kurt and I have also been grateful for the great friendships with several of our neighbors over the past 27 years—neighbors who were there for us from the start, and have always been there for us when we needed them.

Kurt loved his family. The Piheras are a close family—very supportive and forgiving of each other. Many wonderful holidays were spent with them at his parents' and brothers' homes.

Kurt also loved my family and they loved him. He was one of the sons my father never had. We had great Oertley vacations in Oregon, California, Mexico and Greece. One of the most fun trips was exploring the backcountry mountains of Idaho looking for wild hot springs to soak in.

Kurt was always tolerant and supportive of my passion for animals and my chosen profession. I'd come home toting a box or carrier and he'd meet me at the door and say "Who'd you bring home tonight, honey?" He took midnight shifts and helped with the nursing care, whether it was giving fluids or tube feeding. It was great seeing a big man turn into a big moosh with some little creature needing help, whether it was a baby bird, a poodle puppy dyed purple for Easter, Edgar Allen Crow or the bear cub that lived in our basement for two weeks. And he loved all our dogs and cats over the years as much as I did.

All in all, Kurt and I had a great life together. There was never a dull moment. We had great adventures, saw wondrous sites and experienced lots of love. I guess I have only two real regrets. One is that I can't turn back the clock and change a few things which might mean we'd have Kurt longer. And the other is that, I married a strong healthy man seven years younger than me, who was supposed to outlive me and take care of me when I get old, crotchety and infirm.

And damn it if he didn't die first and get out of it!

This article also appeared in the August 2015 issue of the SSLA Llama Journal.

CELEBRATION OF KURT PIHERA'S LIFE (JUNE 13, 2015)

Photos by Susan Gawarecki

