

peace of mind

BUSINESS IS A PLEASURE FOR FORMER MAYOR MICHAEL WHITE, WHO TRADED PUBLIC SERVICE FOR HIS NEW LIFE AS AN AG-PRENEUR

BY ▶ KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY AL FUCHS

The 45-acre “cubicle” of land that Michael White now calls his office is two hours southeast of downtown and a world away from City Hall, where he retired in 2002 from a 12-year run as Cleveland’s mayor.

People heard about a farm somewhere, lots of land and animals.

Then there was talk of alpacas—those camelid creatures with long necks, large, curious eyes like windows, and coats of crimped cloud-soft fiber that spin into luxury yarn: a lucrative investment business these days.

But all this seemed so out of character. The longest-serving mayor now a farmer? Trading his East Boulevard neighborhood where he grew up and stayed for 51 years for chores like moving 30 tons of manure, building barns, analyzing water reports, administering alpaca vaccines and cultivating hay? (“Actually I’m a better picker of hay than I am of a good meal,” White jokes.)

“By now, you’re thinking, ‘Was he struck by lightning?’” White remarks,

quick-witted and conversational like any good neighbor as he begins to methodically retrace the path he and wife JoAnn walked to get where they are today. In particular, that’s Newcomerstown, Ohio, home of Seven Pines Alpacas, a horse rescue foundation and a think tank for White’s constant “noodling.”

“There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t question how we can be a better alpaca breeder,” White says. He’ll wake up in the middle of the night and research a thought on the Internet, and he’s at his desk before sunrise doing “headwork” before he goes out to the field—literally.

“I find ways to compete with the gorilla, whether it’s how we’re breeding, the plan we offer, our service and even the relationships we have with our alpacas,” he continues. “Every day I ask how we can level the playing field with King Kong.”

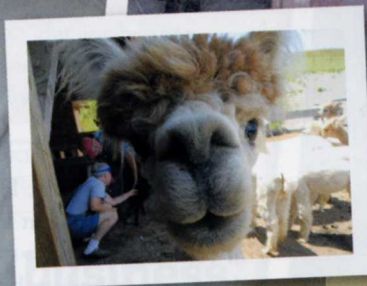
White has always rallied alongside the business owner, and since leaving the public sector, he can make even more clear connections between what government can learn from entrepreneurs.

“Most governments don’t think about themselves as competitive entities, but they are,” he notes. “If the public sector is cutting grass at 40 cents per square foot, why can’t [the government]?” White will share other perspectives on the nexus between small business and government as one of the keynote speakers at the COSE Small Business Conference, Oct. 18 and 19 at the IX Center.

Yes, people have heard about the farm somewhere. But they’d be surprised to learn that the alpaca business is no different than manufacturing high-tech components or marketing any product. The same principles apply: believe in your product, never stop learning, develop systems to ensure quality, provide outstanding customer service, and reduce any margin of error to prevent the competition from taking your share. “You never stop learning,” White muses.

PEACE AND THE PIE

Dressed in work boots and a casual polo bearing the name of his rural business,



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White reflects on the priorities that guide his career. "I made up my mind when I left office to never do just one thing the rest of my life, because I had done just one thing for a very long time," he explains.

"So when I got ready to make a transition," he continues, "I made Michael White a pie."

Half of the Michael White Pie consists of Seven Pines Alpacas, as well as the rescue horse mission, Seven Pines Foundation, that JoAnn and he established as a 501(c)3 foundation. A quarter of the pie is consulting, as White visits Cleveland weekly to provide expertise to clients in the nonprofit sector and speak to professionals. The last 25 percent is dedicated to discovery.

This piece is where creative thoughts shape into ideas, and eventually into business plans. Like when he and JoAnn began looking for their farm back in 1997. The couple searched with three requirements in mind: They wanted three to four acres no further than 45 minutes from town, with no yellow

street lines or traffic in sight. They wound up 100 miles from home with 45 acres of hilly, rough canvas to work. It looked like Jurassic Park.

"A wise person once said that progress is always about seeing the apple in the seed," White reflects. "We were standing in the seed, we just had to see the apple." Then, admittedly, there was little more than dense woods, prickly thorn, rolling hills and a lot of blue sky. The land owner built a gravel road that requires four-wheel drive, and the rest was up to he and JoAnn.

"Nothing prepares you for the day a truck pulls up and two alpacas get out," White says, laughing. They dedicated vacations to alpaca farm tours and studied the business for several years before starting their own. "We knew a lot about livestock—we had a cat," White plays.

But actually, the decision to trade public service for a farm life isn't that off-beat for White. He graduated from The Ohio State University with a degree in agriculture, not politics. His first boss before he

was 18 was Dr. Johnson, an agriculture Ph.D. that "made a dynamic and overwhelming" impact on White when he was young. "I developed a fascination with the land—with being able to take what most people say is nothing, is just dirt, and working it so in three or four months it has such beauty and use," he says.

White kept a garden every year, but still had a lot to learn.

"I had to learn to be resourceful," he relates. "If you had a problem in the city, you called someone. You don't call people here. You figure it out."

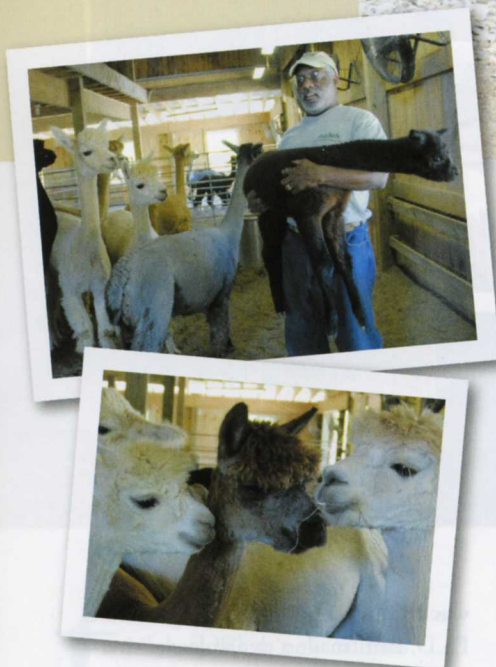
He built the horse barn that rescues horses like Roscoe who has arthritis so bad he can't sit down, and Cody who was "horse-napped" and brought to Seven Pines. JoAnn cares for the horses, and White manages the alpacas.

From neighbors, other breeders and by trial and error, White has learned ways to refine the Seven Pines Alpacas operation. Now in its third generation of alpacas, he can see that attention to detail pays off.

"When we sell alpacas, it's very bitter

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sweet," White admits. He bends slightly so he can look straight into the wide eyes of Peruvian BMW—a stud male alpaca that struts around in the fan-cooled barn eyeing the females like he's the prize. And he is. White cups his sturdy hands around BMW's head with its Mohawk crop of hair, and plants a kiss on his nose. It's an act of affection—and a training ritual to help the alpaca grow more comfortable with humans, White explains.

In the alpaca business, quality is dependent on TLC.

"We tout our customer service program, which is really just a shield to be able to check on our alpacas," White says. "We get baby pictures from owners."

White compares his alpacas to children, and says that customers are Seven Pines' growing family as many of them keep in touch or return for another animal. Before, 90 percent of Seven Pines' customers were first-time alpaca owners. Now, half of them are already in the business, which indicates to White that his business' reputation is building.

POLISHING HIS WORK

A typical day at Seven Pines Alpacas starts before 6 a.m. White checks his e-mail and jumpstarts the morning with business communications, whether working with a Cleveland client or tending to an alpaca customer's need. He might update his online records that track practically every alpaca bodily function, including how long it takes one of their males to mate (average is 16 minutes) and which

shots each baby alpaca has received.

"We keep copious notes on our alpacas," White says. Clipboards with charts on who eats what and when, whether a pregnant mother is past her delivery date and by how many days, when shots are administered and to whom, and other diminutive details are transferred from barn notes to excel spreadsheets every three months. These are then translated into annual reports, which are distributed to buyers.

"We can look at our annual log and track every single thing," White says, opening up several Windows files on his computer to show how the business is organized electronically.

He plays with charts to figure out the best breeding matches for the alpacas—determining right combination is an art and science. He samples different feed combinations, which can improve the quality of an alpaca's fiber (coat). "You can buy the \$13 bag of feed and 90 percent of the time, the alpaca will be fine," White says. "But it's the embracing of technology, the full disclosure with our customers, and the understanding that anyone can make a widget, but the fun is in the margin. If you can stay within that margin, you can have a hell of a business."

White heads to the field later in the morning, managing rudimentary tasks on the farm. But this is equally satisfying. He can tell when an alpaca is sick, scared or just plain tired.

"It's a dynamic business—it's not dull, it's not boring; every single day is something new," he describes, addresses

misperceptions about the technology and market savvy required as an entrepreneur of any kind. "We're dealing with animals and someone else may deal with widgets, but the technology and information is equally sophisticated."

For example, White and JoAnn recently tweaked the pre-birthing protocol for their alpacas. Rather than administering a booster shot to the mother 60 days before deliver, they will move up the vaccination to 30 days prior. That way, the baby is more likely to be born healthy.

"After five years, this is another little way we can improve our herd," White says. While he isn't sure his alpaca business will ever be perfect, he admits "the pursuit of perfection is a real hoot."

"The principles in this business can be lifted up and applied to any other business," he adds. And White is always considering business opportunities. After all, there is that quarter of a pie reserved for all of those "noodles" White collects in his mental file. The only requirement of any venture he pursues is passion for the

project. "I've been blessed in life to do all the things that I love, so it's not work," he says simply.

Also important is that diversity he wants to maintain in life. "I don't want to just do one thing ever again," he says, reiterating the promise to himself.

To that end, White openly announces that he's looking for the next challenge. The alpacas are his passion, the land is a natural fit. But there's always room for discovery, and another business. So when a friend remarked to White, "You're a serial mountain climber," White nodded, affirming the observation. "But any business would have to be something that would get me up every morning," he says simply. <<

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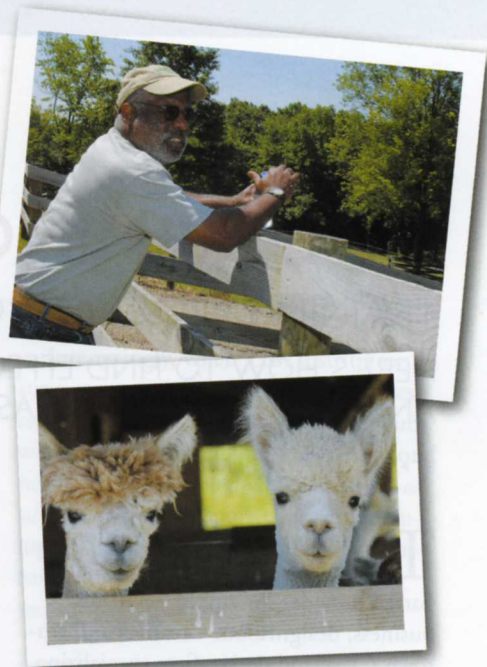
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