

2 MINUTES WITH Stephen Mulholland

Stephen is the man from Takapu Valley who brings his llamas or perhaps the occasional alpaca to special community occasions in Tawa – like Spring into Tawa, the Tawa Christmas Parade, and various school fairs. They're always very popular and add that "something extra" to those occasions.

Where were you born?

Kansas, USA

Where did you grow up?

Mostly east coast USA, in the small central Atlantic state of Delaware.

Where were you educated?

For K-12 I attended Sanford School, which I very much enjoyed. It started as a boarding school, and slowly evolved into a regular day-student type affair. When I was young they still had boarders, many of them children of diplomats – as Delaware is roughly half way between DC and NYC [Washington D.C. and New York City] – so you got a chance to meet interesting kids from around the world.

I received my undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago, and my PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. Did my first PostDoc at Harvard, and then my second at the Genetics Institute.

How long have you lived in Tawa?

We've been in Tawa nearly 14 years now.

Why did you come to New Zealand?

Our semi-joke answer when given this questions is "have you seen this place?" I'd been interested in NZ since my high school years. I'm pretty sure I saw some nature program on sheep mustering in the high country and it caught my imagination. We got the chance to come here on holiday in '99, and we used the holiday as an opportunity for a bit of reconnaissance. So we tried to spent a day or two in each major city, to see if it looked like a place we'd want to live. We were asked many times why we didn't move to Auckland, to which the answer was "if we wanted a sprawling city with terrible traffic we could have just stayed in the US."

Why to Tawa/Wellington in particular?

We liked Wellington. Ironically we ended up spending an extra couple of days here in '99 because the ferries were not running to due huge swells. But the weather wasn't that bad, not by -20C winter comparisons.

We were looking for a lifestyle block, and explored up all the little back roads up into the hills behind Wellington's various suburbs. Finding the place we did was luck as much as anything, but in retrospect we are very glad we live where we do. We can't think of a place in the Wellington area we'd rather live.

What about family?

I've been with my partner Tamara for 25 years. We met while still in University back in the States. No kids.

Work experience over the years

Back in the States I worked for a couple of biotech and pharmaceutical companies (I have a PhD in Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics). Once we arrived in NZ and purchased our small alpaca farm I had to learn a whole new set of skills – including how to remove vast quantities of mature gorse and otherwise improve a run-down property. My science background and interest in llama and alpaca health has now translated into writing articles on camelid health, welfare, breeding, care, etc which have been published around the world. There is always more to do and learn. I got to learn a great deal about highway construction in NZ back in 2014 when we teamed up with Tawa residents to stop the P2G Tawa-damaging options [*to widen SH1 through Tawa and/or build a new highway through Takapu Valley – Ed.*].

What are your interests and hobbies?

Many and varied. I've played with a medieval group for the last 25 years, so if you need a skilled swordsman,

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Ziggy the llama with Stephen at a Tawa event

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I might be able to help you out. I also co-lead a local volunteer urban search and rescue team. And I've started writing science fiction novels, with the hope of maybe one day turning that into a viable income source.

Favourite sports team and/or sports person?

I've always preferred to play rather than watch, partly because the sports I like (see sword fighting, above) don't show up on TV very often.

Favourite musical group and/or individual singer?

A difficult question! My music depends on both my mood, and what I'm doing. I enjoy classical music (particularly German and Russian composers), but if I need to ramp up the energy, blasting out some Queen or Rush is a good option. I have a particular like for Mongolian Opera, which I know is a bit odd, but it is actually quite good once you get used to it!

What is your favourite holiday destination in New Zealand?

We've made it to many corners of this lovely country, except the Coromandel and the Chathams. Some of the best experiences have been on the little tracks that are too often ignored. The small regional and local parks and walks that can lead to a magic spot, little-known, where you can find a tree, a waterfall, or a view that is magical.

What accomplishments/achievements in your life give you the most satisfaction/pride?

When I manage to save a life. Thus far this has been animal lives, when you are there to stop the bleeding, open the airway, untangle the limb or otherwise save the day.

What are three things you would like to do before you die?

Only three? And is this a question of dreams, or practical realities? This is also a question that is prone to change with time, as what I want now is different from what I wanted a decade ago.

At the present my moderate-to-long term goals are to write a big pile of novels telling great stories that people will enjoy, and to help the evolution and maturation of the alpaca industry in New Zealand.