



Monika Sztrama loves to cuddle with her animals, especially her youngest sheep, named Sheldon. The animals on her farm are pets, not food, and she loves them like adopted children.

Weekends With Our Pets

Photos and Story by Kaitlin Abeele

The role of the 'pet' is typically reserved for a dog or cat, maybe a ferret in the odd case, but rarely used to describe a barnyard of animals.

For Monika Sztrama of Kitchener, Ont., a sheep, pig, or emu are just as deserving of the name of 'pet'.

"I tell people at work that I'm going home to hug sheep. They think it's strange, but I just love cuddling the animals," says Sztrama, while holding one of her sheep, named Sheldon, in an embrace.

Sztrama owns three pigs, five sheep, three goats, two emus, over a dozen chickens, a gaggle of ducks, and a horse.

"No we don't eat the animals. Everyone that is here is just a pet. It is a happy farm. Nobody is going to die by butchering. Just, pets," says Sztrama

Sztrama purchased a second property in Kitchener two years ago, with her partner of six years, Joel Vautour. Both Sztrama and Vautour wanted to start a farm but neither were ready to move to the country. They already had a house in the Stanley Park neighbourhood of Kitchener, but wanted a separate property to raise animals.

Vautour had found a listing for a small property along the Grand River Trail, just over one acre, which already had a barn and a farmhouse. It was in the neighbourhood of Bridgeport, tucked in among older residential houses, and a scenic walking trail that follows the river.

The major problem they faced with the property was the house. It was unlivable, and remains uninhabitable until they reconstruct the entire interior of the house. This task is primarily left for Vautour and his friend Kevin "Fish Head" Slack to accomplish. Vautour works over 50 hours a week in construction, so the job is well within his capabilities, but it is still daunting.

"He's the builder here. He's the magic man. I'm the one envisioning and dreaming things, he's the one that makes it happen. I dream it and he builds it," says Sztrama.

In its current state, the house has no insulation, no walls, no bathrooms, and a large hole where the living room floor should be. With the farmhouse unfinished, they cannot sell their other house, which means they must pay for two mortgages.

"The difficulty is mostly time and money. I think it was a little over our budget to jump into a second property, but we manage it. We have to work really hard to manage two mortgages. And because we work lots of hours, we don't have much time to spend here," says Sztrama.

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While Vautour oversees most of the construction projects, Sztrama is largely in charge of caring for the animals, rushing over to the farm every evening after working eight hours as a florist at KW Flowers. She carries feed out into the pasture to distract the animals while she gets to work cleaning out the barn, fetching clean water and fresh bedding.

The bulk of the work is saved for weekends, when Sztrama and Vautour will spend up to ten hours a day working on the farm. In the summertime, Sztrama keeps a vegetable garden, which gives her a break from cleaning.

Sztrama and Vautour hope to have the house finished and moved into by next winter. This would save both time and money, which are both precious commodities in their busy schedules.

Sztrama says she would ultimately like to organize trips for school children to visit the farm. In the next ten years, she would like to sell the property and purchase a larger farm in the country, which would allow them to expand the number of animals that they keep.

"We got really lucky. I think this was meant to be, but I don't think this will be the end of it."



An old farmhouse built in 1875 on a small one acre lot in the Bridgeport subdivision was purchased by Monika Sztrama and her partner Joel Vautour two years ago, which they use as a small farm for over 20 animals.



Monika Sztrama's first chore is feeding all of the animals, which she does outside in the paddock so that the animals will leave the barn so that she can muck the stalls.



Joel Vautour welds the frame of a feeding trough that he is building to put in the paddock for the animals to eat hay from. Joel's makeshift 'workshop' is just a small clearing behind the farm, filled with half-finished projects and lawn mowers.



A big part of Monika Sztrama's work on her farm in Kitchener is gardening. Monika says she loves gardening and finds that it is a good stress reliever from all her other chores on the farm.