

*Alive in the Hive Beekeeper's Event- One attendant's experience*  
*Kat Moody- March 18, 2022 (10 hours)*

*We just had the most wonderful experience! Dave and I attended the “Alive in the Hive” event at Joc Rawl’s home in central Phoenix this morning. In the beginning, we were told to bring “our own protection”, and that we “might have to sign a waver” (?!?) which to me meant “stay in the car”. We only have ONE bee suit after all and Dave would be the one to wear it. If Joc’s bees were anything like OUR bees, I don’t want anything to do with them. But then again, ours are Africanized, his are not. Or so he says. So I brought some drawing materials so I can sit under the shade, let the boys have their fun and just chat with the other ladies there.*

*We arrive about fifteen minutes late, (thanks to my phone’s lousy directions), but find a parking place right away. (I thought it would be hard to find a parking place because this event was going to be so popular, and so we were told to park on a side street- which turned out to be right outside Joc’s side yard.) We walk through a fence gate- and before I realize it, RIGHT PAST the BEE HIVES. Here they are, about four or five of them stacked next to each other just inside the backyard gate! (If I were his neighbor, I’d be worried.) I quickly put my stuff down under an umbrella next to the pool, and then am dismayed to see that I am the only lady there. No one to chat with. So now, I either go sit by myself in the car, or put on the second veil that Dave brought and participate. I bravely opted to participate.*

*There were only about five or six people altogether. A nice, cozy group, given the corner of the yard where the beehives are is small, this seems to work well. One child, a boy about 8 or 9, wearing a name tag with “William” on it, is decked out in a full child-size beekeeper’s suit. Of course, he looks adorable and I have to take his picture. The other guys wear various items for protection; veils, netting, some gloves, some not, suits, or just long sleeve shirts. As the demo begins, we discover the bees are SO TAME, no one needed to wear anything protective at all. (Se what’s with the waiver??)*

*I put on a veil that sometime ago, Dave sewed to a long-sleeved T-shirt, because the full suit was too much work to put on, then wiggled my way up to the front of the group. Dave got in his head-to-toe bee suit. Joc has the kind of bees found mostly in pleasant dreams, but I am taking no chances. I mark in my mind, my escape routes. All it takes in one little bugger flying up your nose to ruin your day. At least for me.*

*Joc starts out showing us how to set up a smoker. He uses this to confuse the bees' sense of smell so they can't rally the troops. He has a big bucket of pine needles and a bag of pellets used to smoke meat with- just so the smoke doesn't harm the bees. (I would think they would love it!) Ooo! Smells like barbarque!!*

*I'm impressed that someone would think about how the bees feel about being clouded with ash dust-! The only other thing he could have done more is actually ASK their opinion and permission. (Which he probably has). By now he has a good plume of smoke pouring out of the smoker and so moves over to the first hive. The rest of us follow meekly behind.*

*All this time, the bees are coming and going in a cloud of gentle buzzing. Busy at their assigned jobs, they hardly notice us- not even a guard bee stops long enough to check out these strangers. I am again impressed. At home, if you so much as walk within a fifty foot radius outside our bees' hives, they would be all over you before you had time to turn around and run. Here, they are more like "pets". Joc, being a seasoned veterinarian, understands them and knows how to pacify them into willing compliance. Wow.*

*Joc moves over to the closest hive. He says this one is very "friendly". He slowly and carefully lifts the top lid and slides out a frame. It is covered with a couple hundred bees who wiggle and climb over each other like kids on a jungle gym. They don't notice that they are now about a foot above the hive box. Joc explains that we need to keep the frame over the open box so that if the queen is on it, she will not fall off and onto the ground, becoming a challenge to recapture, but fall in the hive box instead. He turns the frame over and checks for the queen.*

*“She’s the one with the white spot on her back.” He tells William, who is leaning over his shoulder. “Can you find her?” We can’t. Joc carefully turns the frame, pointing out the drone bees to William who is transfixed by this sea of activity. Setting the frame in a holder clipped on the side of the frame box, he explains the different parts of the hive and what they do. Each frame is examined one by one, until all the frames are checked. Next, Joc tells us that each queen sports a color marking on the back of her thorax so she can be easily identified. The colors are changed each year so beekeepers know just how old a queen is and when to replace her. (No job security here!) He picks up a drone bee and points to a small bottle of paint on the table behind us. Then invites anyone who wants to practice marking a bee to come forward. William is first. He expertly touches the bee’s back with a tiny drop of red, as if he had been doing it all his life. “Bravo! Good Job, William!” Someone cries out.*

*Joc passes a drone bee to me, probably because I am unknowingly standing next in line. Hesitating, I try to take the bee with a gloved hand. I can’t, so he sets the bee on my other hand, which has no glove. He assures me that drones can’t sting. This helps, and I marvel as the tiny creature crawls along my hand. He doesn’t seem to mind me, and I find that I don’t seem to mind him either, which surprises me. I can actually stand here quietly and allow this fearful thing to crawl all over me and it’s... alright. Then I hear myself talking to this little bee as if it were a puppy. Really?! I don’t ever remember being this calm around a honeybee- ever! Especially one crawling on my skin! In fact, my first experience with bees started when I stepped on one with my bare feet as a seven year old. My whole leg swelled up for three days.*

*Dipping a toothpick in the paint bottle, I place a spot of red on the drone’s abdomen- Oops! wrong place- so I again touch the paint stick to the bee- this time to it’s thorax (back?) instead. Not as accurate as William, I get TWO spots on my poor drone. Oh well- he will be the fanciest bee in the hive! We allow the drones to dry so they don’t pass their colors on to other bees, before setting them back down on the hive ledge.*

*After going through two more hives, we are now at the last hive as Joc explains about feeding bees. This hive, he says, is a “bit touchy” and not as nice as the others there. He is no more or less careful with this hive as he slowly pries open the lid with a small crowbar. This one he’s been supplementing with sugar which he uses when there aren’t enough flowers blooming, or if they are dealing with other issues. Flowers are starting to come out so he says he will stop supplementing them soon.*

*He pulls out a “bee trough”. It looks like a black plastic “grate”. A solution of table sugar and water is poured into the bottom and this grate goes on top of the water. With this device, the bees can step out onto a ladder of sorts and suck sugar water from below without drowning in it. (Are we humans not constantly “drowning” in sugar?? If only we could figure out how to do the same-!) He tells us that it IS possible to give them so much sugar they actually start making HONEY out of it. Which is NOT a good thing. But in some countries, this is even encouraged. (Of course, that’s the nutrient-less stuff they send to the US.) It’s cheap and fast. But “REAL” honey is made of flower pollen.*

*I am amused that even these “less friendly” bees ignore us tramping around in their home. Joc pulls out a frame of drones and starts poking one of the capped cells with a pointed needle. It gushes open, revealing a half-formed pale yellow larvae. He points to two brown specks on it’s back. “Verroa mites” he says disappointedly. Poking another and then another, we find that all of them have Verroa mites. “This frame will have to be discarded, along with all the drone larvae.” I have become fond of his friendly bees at this point, and this news upsets me. But the infestation is bad and these can’t be saved. At least the mites are contained in this hive only- for now. Joc explains that he has been trying to destroy the mites in this hive for some time now, as he displays various poisons. No wonder they’re gripey, I think.*

*Joc says he doesn’t like to keep the hives open very long because it is too upsetting to the bees and takes them too long to recover. (Who even THINKS of these things?? I had no idea!) Joc has the opening of each*

*hive timed just long enough to show us what we need to see. Then, in consideration of the bees, he again gently closes them.*

*Our last stop is a tour of the backyard, which is about a half acre planted with all kinds of flowering trees and shrubs surrounding a large pool. Tall, yellow daisies, towering Pomegranate trees, yellow trumpets, and orange trees scattered across a neatly kept lawn, create a pleasant paradise of calm and renewing. (My yoga instructor daughter would LOVE this-!) There is even a row of Venus fly traps and other insect eating greenery. (And yes, they occasionally get a bee, but mostly flies and paper warps.)*

*There are only three of us left now. Joc knows not only the type of plants he has, as he planted each one personally, but what it does, what it needs and how to take care of it properly. Must be the vet in him- It's as if each one is a patient of his where he makes his rounds daily to see that everything is alright. We pass several water features, as he explains that it's important to have many sources of water for the bees. (With us, it's the pond or go thirsty. So I learned something.)*

*Our tour ends at the shed where all the beekeeping equipment is kept. Every possible tool is shelved within reach and neatly organized for easy access. There are all sorts of gadgets to keep bees happy these days- most of which I never knew existed. Queen separators, feeders, anti-robbing devices, do-dads to hold frames while you're working, air filters and purifiers-! Each hive is like a carefully constructed hotel with everything a honey bee could ever want or need. (A bee paradise!)*

*Joc pulls out extra boxes, frames, and cooling or warming devices, as he answers all our questions and has a solution for each of our challenges. When we run out of things to ask, it is time to leave. It's already an hour past when this event was supposed to end, but like the gracious host he is, Joc never mentions a word about time. (Wish my doctors were like this!) We thank him profusely, grab a cookie and a bottle of cooled water, as we pass the hives for the last time on the way to the car.*

*On the drive home, my mind goes over all the info I packed into my head today. WAY too much to remember. But the thing that impressed me the most was Joc and his relationship with his bees. He respected them. He cared for each bee. We opened up at least five hive lids and pulled 10 or more frames out and played with them and there was NOT ONE bee squashed or injured in any way. Now that's impressive! When he opened the hive lids, he did it so carefully, slowly and painstakingly, gently moving past every bee that might be in the way. When sliding the frames in or out, he did it as if he were performing brain surgery-! Constantly watching so as to not even brush a bee out of it's place. I doubt that he's ever even insulted them!*

*The bees were so calm, they hardly moved at all when he touched them. Like they just trusted him. You can't BUY that kind of relationship. People like me are not supposed to keep bees. But then, people like Joc, go beyond just keeping them- they ADORE them and treat them like cherished guests or valuable assets. Or, like Joc, family. Seems like a full-time job to me, but people like Joc do this because they LOVE their bees. And that makes all the difference. Now that's a master beekeeper. I feel I am now better equip to deal with the bees in my own backyard and the funny thing is, I think I actually LIKE bees now too. Thanks Joc!*