Warm And Fuzzy

By Dana Larsen on May 3, 2013

By guest blogger: Liz Matt

Liz Matt is a longtime feature reporter and former television host in Philadelphia. Liz's beat has included coverage of the performing and visual arts, lifestyles, travelogues, celebrity spotlights and family profiles.

Pet therapy isn’t exactly news in senior care... at least, the dog and cat variety. BUNNY therapy, however, is bringing some unique advantages to a senior community in North Dayton, Ohio, through the kindness of an exceptional neighbor who called and offered her warm and fuzzy services free of charge.

Bunny Therapy’s Advantages in Senior Care

An award-winning Dayton-based bunny breeder, 19-year old Cassie Tuttle brings half a dozen or more of her adorable Mini-Rex rabbits, including the state of Ohio’s “4-H Grand Champion” Max, for frequent therapeutic pet cuddling sessions with senior residents at Spring Hills Singing Woods, an assisted living and memory care residence a short distance from her home. Her arrival for each session is itself a sight to behold, as she totes her creatures in an array of individual pocketbooks, each bunny wiggling and peeking out with anticipation. As each pet is placed in the lap of a resident, the cuddling immediately produces positive responses, ranging from squeals of delight to calm relaxation.
Deirdre Middlestetter Exec Dir, Resident Peggy Still and Breeder Cassie Tuttle each holding a bunny

“In many ways, handling a rabbit has a lot of advantages for seniors compared with petting a dog,” Cassie Tuttle explains. “They’re light and huggable like a teddy bear, so you can hold them on your lap or cuddle them up high and bury your face in their fur. Bunnies don’t jump around and they really don’t drool, which some dogs do. And they really do feel good to everybody.”

As is widely established in eldercare, the stroking of a docile animal can be beneficial in stress reduction and promoting general feelings of well-being. Even in communities that welcome personal pet ownership, which includes all of the residences in the Spring Hills Senior Communities group, many seniors do not feel confident caring for a dependent animal and yet miss the special relationship they once enjoyed with a family companion animal.

What Was The Catalyst To Start Bunny Therapy?

Cassie Tuttle began working with rabbits as a 4-H’er when she was seven years old. When she was ten, she had her initial experiences as a 4-H volunteer bringing bunnies to visit senior communities. Now a young adult and a successful rabbit breeder caring for forty rabbits, Tuttle says that — at least where her personal animals are involved — the beneficial touch of bunny therapy is comforting both ways, as it brings happiness to the humans and to her pets. “Since my rabbits have been hand-raised and handled daily since infancy, they actually crave attention,” Tuttle added. “Now that we have returned many times, some of my rabbits seem to have favorite people they look forward to seeing.”
Bunny snuggles with resident, Peggy Still

Cassie Tuttle is often assisted in these visits by her mother Suzanne Tuttle, a disabled veteran. Suzanne Tuttle introduced her daughter to raising and breeding rabbits as a small child because Cassie Tuttle is an individual with Asperger’s, a syndrome associated with communication challenges and difficulties with social interaction. Raising and presenting show-quality bunnies has offered a calming avenue of socialization for Cassie, as she matured. Taking the initiative to bring the rabbits to the Spring Hills seniors and her leading role as their handler has increased Cassie Tuttle’s personal confidence, as well. During March of 2013, her generous work attracted the spotlight when every major television station in Dayton showed up to watch one of Cassie’s cuddle-sessions at Spring Hills Singing Woods five days before Easter. A recent graduate of home-schooling, Cassie Tuttle has now determined that she will soon go on to study therapeutic touch in a formal way and make that her career.

**Bunny Therapy Is “A Special Experience For All”**

Regular interaction between residents and neighbors is a key value at each of the Spring Hills Senior Communities, which span from northern New Jersey to central Florida. Deirdre Middlestetter, the Executive Director of Spring Hills Singing Woods in Dayton, Ohio feels very fortunate that this generous young volunteer from their neighborhood has brought so much joy into their residence. “Whenever the bunnies arrive,” Middlestetter said with a big smile, “the staff all gathers around because they love handling these animals too. It’s a special experience for all of us. We love it when Cassie and her bunnies come around.”