

The Brownfield Family and Bunnies



Hi! This is Kim, Elli and Bradi Brownfield and we are all registered handlers with our rabbits Mr. Kitty, Gizmo, Bean, Hank, and Norman. Our journey into pet therapy began about 4 years ago. Bradi was 9 when she suffered an injury doing gymnastics that required her to be on very restricted movement for several months. We decided to adopt a new pet to lift her spirits and found our first Lionhead rabbit “Mr. Kitty” from a breeder on Craigslist. I had rabbits growing up as a child and didn’t know much about Lionheads, but soon found the breed to be very interactive, gentle and loving. This was just the distraction Bradi needed to get her mind off her injury. Once she was healed, we started taking Mr. Kitty out for adventures because we found that he was very comfortable on a harness in public. We took him shopping, to street fairs, and parks and were amazed at all the attention that he got. He brought out so much joy and that is when we started thinking of getting him registered as a therapy animal to help people that needed their spirits lifted.





The process of getting Mr. Kitty registered through Pet Partners took about 6 months. I contacted the national organization and found that the local evaluators had never worked with rabbits before. So, it was a learning process for everyone to get Mr. Kitty trained properly to make sure he would be safe and enjoy visits. Even though we passed our evaluation the first time, it took another 6 months of visiting before we really felt comfortable. I was amazed at all the challenges that I had to figure out in order to successfully maneuver through a hospital...with a rabbit...in a basket...and bag full of blankets...while opening doors...and keeping him controlled and safe.



At our first evaluation I met a Pet Partners volunteer named Bonnie that was insistent that I start visiting at Craig Hospital. She described their extensive therapy animal program and thought Mr. Kitty would be a big hit...and she was exactly right.



Craig was very welcoming to us; even though they had never had a rabbit team visit before. Craig is a rehabilitation hospital that treats patients from all over the country that have had traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries. Their patients typically have limited mobility and a rabbit is the perfect size to be placed next to a hand or face for people to experience their soft fur.



My daughters actually were the first ones to express interest in animal therapy, but because doing therapy with rabbits was so rare, I thought it was best to start with myself. Once I had been visiting for a while with Mr. Kitty we started looking into the possibility of training another rabbit and having the girls join me. I reached out to several local Lionhead breeders and found out that retired show rabbits could be perfect for animal therapy. Show rabbits spend several years in crowded places, being

transported, and extensively handled by strangers...excellent training for therapy visits! Once I explained what I was doing the breeders were happy to donate rabbits to us that they thought would be a good fit. And that is how we came to adopt Gizmo and Bean.

DPP Team of the Month (August 2020)

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Their training was much easier than Mr. Kitty's because I was much more experienced, and we knew what would be required of them. Six months later Elli passed evaluations with Gizmo and Bean, and then Bradi joined with another retired show rabbit, Norman, when she turned 10. It was very difficult to find places to visit that accepted both rabbits and young handlers. Most facilities had never had experience with either of these before and did not want to take the risk. It was at this point that we joined Denver Pet Partners and they helped us get connected with Parker Night Lights, which ended up being another great fit. Eventually, Craig Hospital invited all three of us to visit, so now we are able to do bunny therapy together. One rabbit in a basket is often an unusual sight for people, but three is even more exciting. Each of our therapy rabbits have very different personalities and like being handled in different ways. Visiting Craig hospital with several rabbits gives us the ability to choose which rabbit will do best for each individual's challenges to give them the best experience possible.



Once we figured out how to train rabbits for therapy visits the process actually became quite easy and we decided to try and help other people train their rabbits for therapy too. Last year we wrote a manual on training rabbits for Animal Assisted Activities and have given out over 75 copies through the bunny's Instagram account @bunniesarethebesttherapy. Bradi was also featured on American Ninja Warrior Junior for her work with animal therapy.

My most memorable encounter was at Craig Hospital with a college student that was recovering from a severe traumatic brain injury. She had been in hospitals for several months after a car accident and was new to Craig. We were walking through the halls visiting rooms and her family sought us out once they heard we were bringing rabbits around. Her parents explained that in college she had a pet rabbit and she used to stroke its' ears while studying to calm her anxiety. They were excited for her to see a rabbit again to find out if she would be able to react to it.





Once we went to her room, we held the rabbits in the basket in front of her but she could not maintain fixation and didn't seem to respond much. So, we decided to put Gizmo on a blanket on her lap and placed her hand on him. Initially, she was agitated, but once she felt his ears in her hands she instinctively started stroking them slowly and you could immediately see the tension in her body and face relax. After just a few minutes tears started running down her face...and then her parents...and then mine. It was amazing to see that this was the connection she needed to show her parents that she was still the same person. I will never forget how this solidified the human animal connection for me.

Over the past three years my daughters and I have been lucky enough to have so many special encounters and experience the wonder of animal therapy together. I am forever grateful to Denver Pet Partners for helping to make this happen for us. Rabbits are not the typical therapy animal, but we have shown that they can provide a special connection that is very unique to them.

