

HOP TO IT

WHAT IS EASTER WITHOUT THE inclusion of 'aww-inspiring' animals? Lambs frolicking in sunny fields, yellow-plumed chicks chirping inside festive bonnets and, of course, rabbits. The epitome of the Easter holidays, the Easter Bunny acting as a springtime Santa, leaving endless amounts of chocolate for well-behaved children all over the world.

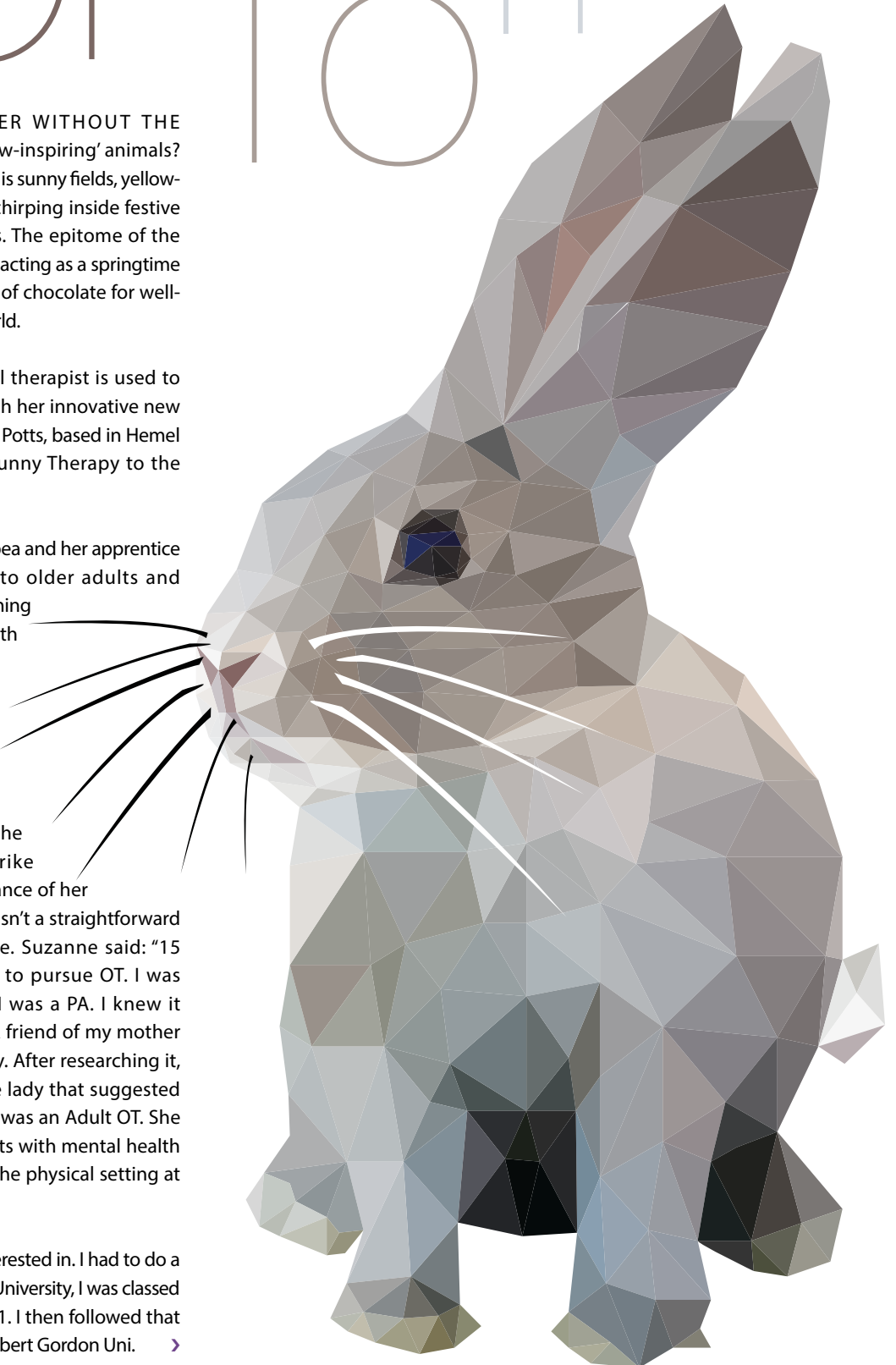
One independent occupational therapist is used to having Easter all year round, with her innovative new take on animal therapy. Suzanne Potts, based in Hemel Hempstead, has introduced Bunny Therapy to the masses.

Her two therapy bunnies, Sweetpea and her apprentice Smokey, are bringing smiles to older adults and children alike and they are becoming increasingly busier, especially with the Easter weekend on the cards.

These fluffy little bundles of joy are here to provide help and happiness to people of all ages.

After ten years of service with the NHS, Suzanne decided to strike out on her own, with the assistance of her assistive animals. However, it wasn't a straightforward path she followed to get there. Suzanne said: "15 years ago, I decided I wanted to pursue OT. I was at a crossroads in my career, I was a PA. I knew it wasn't really for me anymore. A friend of my mother suggested occupational therapy. After researching it, I shadowed several people. The lady that suggested it to me was Ann Pritchard, she was an Adult OT. She worked in a secure unit for adults with mental health issues. I then shadowed OTs in the physical setting at the local hospital.

"It was something I was really interested in. I had to do a year's access course at Aberdeen University, I was classed as a mature student at 24 in 2001. I then followed that up with the four year course at Robert Gordon Uni. >



- › “When I graduated I moved down to work in West Hertfordshire with the NHS. They had a fantastic rotation at the time which mixed both mental health and physical settings, that rotation was every six months. On one of those rotations I went to an in-patient unit that dealt with adults that had dementia. I found my love there. I progressed through that into specialising in dementia and obtained my Masters from Stirling University in 2014. In 2013 I took the leap to become independent whilst working part-time in the NHS. It was an acute setting, so there was no conflict of interest. I am now completely independent and it is the best thing I have ever done.”

After just over two years, Bunny Therapy has taken off with an ever-increasing popularity. Suzanne, who specialises in older adults with dementia, mainly in care homes, has an intense passion for both animals and the therapeutic advantages they have, as well as, the constant challenge of improving the life of elderly inpatients with both physical and mental health issues.

The Benefits of Bunnies

Suzanne and her rabbits, Sweetpea and Smokey, take their job very seriously and their aim is to provide a variety of therapeutic benefits for individuals and/or groups.

These include promoting:

- **Physical Movement** – by stroking, brushing and playing with Sweetpea and Smokey.
- **Sensory Stimulation** – including hearing the soft noises they make, feeling their smooth fur, as well as, their pleasing aesthetics.
- **Socialisation** - when Sweetpea and Smokey are present, because they are such unique visitors, people start to initiate conversations, they can also incite a relaxed atmosphere and help destress an environment.
- **Memories and Reminiscence** - when people stroke or watch the rabbits, they can start to recall memories and stories of past pets and their experience with animals, some people even remember rabbit recipes they ate in their childhood. Anything is classed as a positive when people are engaging and making connections with the bunnies.

Over the last two years, Suzanne’s client base has included one-off visits or regular slots in her Bunny Diary. She takes the rabbits to visit dementia cafe’s, carer groups, stroke clubs, community day centres, individual sessions in a client’s own home, local libraries and well-being events, inpatient mental health units, nursing homes and sheltered housing, to name a few.



Soft snuggles with Sweetpea

When on a visit, the bunnies sit on their lap tray and the clients can stroke, brush or just observe them. Being on a lap tray means that it’s great for meeting people who are in beds or wheelchairs. Suzanne makes sure that all interactions with the animals are graded and adapted for each individual’s needs.

Suzanne spoke about her, what some would call, ‘bizarre’ choice of therapy. She said: “I chose bunnies because they are portable, cuddly, fluffy and most people don’t have negative associations with rabbits. For example, people might be frightened of dogs if they have been bitten in the past.”

She remembers when she realised that this type of therapy was not only appealing, but highly functional for all ages. Suzanne said: “There was a man in the first nursing home I ever went to. He was bedbound, at the end stages of dementia. I went in with Sweetpea and his eyes lit up. The activity coordinator couldn’t believe the reaction. He reached out his hand and with my assistance he began stroking her. He said ‘how lovely’. The activity coordinator got quite emotional at this point because what I didn’t know, was that that was the first verbal communication he had made in months.

“I went there monthly until he sadly passed away, he always lit up when he saw the rabbits.”

The future for Sweetpea and Smokey is far from quiet. Suzanne is keen to expand the list of places she visits and the people she reaches. She is also eager to start a major online presence with hopping social media accounts and a blog that will allow the bunny fans to check out what Sweetpea and Smokey are doing that day. There may even be some more bunnies joining the team on the horizon.

Suzanne is excited about the up-keep of Bunny Therapy, but at the moment, she’s playing it by ear! ■

