

Older people and youngsters share an affinity for animals. A few 4-H'ers in Yuma County rediscover that every month when they visit the Desert Manor Convalescent Center.

The weather was warm and inviting when the 4-H teens recently brought horses to the center's parking lot. Clair Wuthrich, 90-plus, remembered that her grandfather in Switzerland always had two horses. Her joy was plain to see as she fed a cookie to Dawny Dell, a friendly roan belonging to Brad Allec.

Ninety-three-year-old Helen Cote was right up in front in her wheelchair watching the riders perform. "I know horses; I used to ride." When the 4-H'ers dismounted, Helen was the first to say, "I want to pet that horse." Soon, she stretched up and gently kissed its muzzle. Helen had watched the youngsters with their project animals before; "It's always good medicine for me."

That's one of the reasons University of Arizona 4-H agent Mike Schneider started the visitation project. The youngsters have talked about leather craft and candle making; they've held a fashion review of clothes sewed by the 4-H'ers. But animals are the real hit of the shows.

"Animals trigger memories. People's expressions become animated; they start to talk even if they're usually placid or withdrawn," Mike says. "It's something special for the kids, too. Often they never come into contact with this far end of life. They should."

He and the Yuma 4-H'ers have taken chickens, pigeons, dogs, guinea pigs, and rabbits to the nursing home. Just like the horses, rabbits were another instant hit. Twenty-seven wheelchair-bound elders watched as five 4-H'ers from Crane North 4-H Club, led by Sandra Durham, demonstrated how they hold, move, and display their rabbits for show judges.

Everyone listened intently, but the real fun started when rabbits and owners moved among the residents. Ruby

Burgett was fascinated by James Rober-son's three-month-old rabbit named, appropriately enough, Floppy. As she petted the rabbit softly, she said, "That one ought to be Floppy; his ears go down. It's a pretty little doll."

Ruby had practical advice for Aaron Herbert, who brought a full-grown satin doe, a breed commonly used for meat. "Are you going to cry when you sell it?"

"Yeah."

"Take Kleenex with you."

Elders in nursing homes are always delighted to see the animals—and the young 4-H'ers. So was everyone at the Adult Day Health Care Center, operated by Catholic Community Services in Yuma. The United Way agency is responsible for as many as fifteen elderly people, most of whom live with relatives who bring them to the center at half-past seven each morning and take them home at five thirty in the afternoon.

The 4-H'ers' rabbits and one guinea pig didn't stay in their cages long. Most elders gathered around, eager to stroke, cuddle, and, in Robert Vomocil's case, feed the animals. First he tried feeding a carrot stick to Matthew Tillery's still-caged white rabbit. No luck. As Robert peered more closely at the reluctant rabbit, he saw the reason. "I got the wrong end! No wonder he won't eat. Whyn't you bring something over that's hungry?" Tiffany Morse's friendly black guinea pig called, appropriately enough, Baby Pig, fit the bill. It sat near Robert's hand munching as long as there was carrot.

Deanna Tillery, Kamela Morse, and Tori and Carrie Irwin made sure that everyone had their turn petting and cuddling the rabbits. Edna Connelly picked a rabbit up for a closer look, put it next to her cheek, and murmured softly for long minutes. The rabbit's nose stopped twitching and he sat calmly, apparently as contented as Edna was with the contact.

"Feels just like my cats used to; I miss them." 🐾

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD



FOR PETS

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