

Donkey Magic Works Wonders

Picture the scene: you are in a residential home, sitting in your room. There is movement in the corridor, a quiet knock at the door – and a small donkey walks in to see you.

He is not alone. Two smiling helpers from the Elisabeth Svendsen Trust are with him, one at his head, one at his bottom end. You break into a smile from ear to ear, then a wonderful laugh, and spend a priceless few minutes, talking to them and to the donkey.

You relish the warmth of his breath as he breathes gently on you. You never thought you'd feel that gentle breeze or stroke a furry coat again. Such scenes are not unusual. Calm, gentle and quiet, donkeys give out their own quiet understanding and love in a way that only animals can.



Donkeys from the Elisabeth Svendsen Trust (EST for short) regularly visit homes, adult learning centres and day care centres, and hospices. The EST is affiliated with the Devon-based Donkey Sanctuary.

Staff at the EST work with Activities Managers in homes in particular to bring donkey magic to residents. The donkeys tend to meet residents and staff in the homes' lounges, except for those who are bedridden or too frail to leave their rooms, and then the donkeys paid them a personal bedside visit.

The Trust has several teams of donkeys, based in Sidmouth, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. Today they are a very busy group, with lots of successful visits and happy smiling faces behind them. One lady only puts her make-up on when Alvis is coming to visit.

"These visits have a really fantastic impact on our residents," Bupa Care Home Manager Sarah Slym enthuses.

Her home, Perry Locks in Birmingham, has been enjoying the donkeys for about 18 months. The home has about 120 residents, many who are terminally ill, or who have dementia and they find the visits very stimulating.

"The donkeys bring back happy memories for them of family seaside holidays, and they love to stroke the donkeys – they are so gentle. We have pictures of one of them, Alvis, all over the place. He is a very handsome donkey." Alvis, aged 20, visits several BUPA Care homes in Birmingham, and even goes as far afield as Nottingham.

Amber Brennan from EST explains: "We tend to choose donkeys who are older; they've been there, done it and got the t-shirt, and nothing upsets them. They are used to hoists, wheelchairs, zimmer-frames, children and dogs. And they love the tea trolley - they like to see what biscuits are on offer!"

"The staff love the visits too," Sarah Slym emphasises. "Anything which breaks up the day for the residents and gives them a difference to the normal routine of meals and having a bath is a good thing. The donkeys come to see us every two weeks, and they also attend our fete."



After the donkeys return home, there is a tremendous buzz as everyone talks about the donkey's visit. They bring back memories of times past for many of the residents and staff. Everyone talks about pets they had, all great and small. Residents and staff have a new – and safe – topic of conversation which will keep them occupied for some time. Importantly, the laughter and joy the donkeys spread about them has many health benefits to residents and staff. Their quiet unexpected presence relieves stress and reduces depression, enabling everyone to benefit from donkey magic!

So how did these visits start? A staff member at the Donkey Sanctuary suggested that it might be a good idea if donkeys visited residential and nursing homes. They sounded out some homes in the area, who welcomed the idea enthusiastically. In April 1999, the first group of donkeys arrived at a nursing home in Devon to entertain residents and staff there on the lawn outside. It wasn't long before the homes invited the donkeys and staff into their lounges, because many residents weren't able to get outside, but wanted to meet their new four legged friends. And shortly thereafter, they were invited to go to the residents' rooms themselves, as some people in the homes were too ill or frail to leave them.

Inevitably, questions spring to mind about health and safety.

"The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust has this cracked," Sarah Slym says. "All the animals are fully inoculated and they come in a carrier full of freshly laid straw. Our Activities Organiser, who goes around with them, takes wipes, so after each resident has stroked and patted the donkey, they clean their hands. They are spotless when they come into the home, including their hooves which have been wiped clean and dried."

The donkeys seem to know not to go to the loo while they are in the home – but the polite, cheerful happy helpers from the Elisabeth Svendsen Trust carry a bucket with them just in case. The donkeys normally give a sign to the helpers that they need to go, and then they are simply taken outside to do the necessary. The donkeys receive training before they go into any home, so that they are used to walking down narrow carpeted corridors and travel calmly in the lorry. They are happy with the sounds of phones ringing, TVs blaring and computers humming.



Amber Brennan explains: "Often residents ask if their grandchildren can come in to see the donkeys," she says, "and we often go to their fetes and fairs where the children can groom and pat the donkeys. They love it, and the residents love seeing their happy faces."

"I've got no hesitation in recommending other homes do this," Sarah Slym says. "Fears are unfounded: any risk is very minor and greatly outweighed by the benefits of the donkeys visiting. And for us, the biggest impact is when we have animals and children visiting – the joy they bring to the residents is so very important."

For more info on the Elisabeth Svendsen Trust (EST), visit <http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/>

All photos on this PDF courtesy of the Donkey Sanctuary - Thank you!