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## 'It's a double whammy': local charity provides better life for animals and therapy for people

"It's our life. It's our lifestyle. And if we can get up in the morning to make a child smile then it's been worthwhile." Mary Chapman, BEM, talks about animals, the charity Nuzzlets, and how it all started with an unexpected knock on her door.

In 2002, Mary and Kathy Chapman received an unexpected visit from a woman who lived locally.

"She just came across and knocked on the front door and said would we be able to take some Shetland ponies," explains Mary.

Keen riders, Mary and her daughter Kathy already had a few horses on their property in Great Ouseburn. She figured a few more would be ok.

"They desperately needed a home and we had the room here. So we took them in...That was the very first thing that happened. If she hadn't [knocked on the door] we probably might not have started the rescue."

Shortly after getting the horses, Mary and Kathy added more animals to their growing farm. "We went to thank the people that they came from and ended up bringing home a goat and her two babies."



Two of the goats currently on the farm

At the time, Mary was the head of sixth form at a comprehensive school with close links with Martin House Children's Hospice. Thinking that the children would like to see the animals, she reached out to them.

"I rang them and said would they like to come and see the animals. They've been coming ever since and we've been rescuing animals ever since."

In the following few years, Mary and Kathy co-founded Nuzzlets—a charity that rescues animals and provides therapy and education. They specialise in visits for disabled and special needs children with life limiting illnesses.

What started as an animal rescue transitioned to a voluntary group and finally a charity, gaining DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) accreditation and approval to operate as a countryside classroom.

Over the two decades, Nuzzlets has rescued and rehomed hundreds of animals including horses, goats, sheep, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, hedgehogs and chickens. The support of many dedicated volunteers has allowed Nuzzlets to reach thousands of people in the local areas.

None of this was ever part of their plan. "It was just a natural progression, honestly," Mary says. "We didn't think we were going to do it. It just happened. And it seemed like a very good idea, and it just grew."



Getting ready for Halloween on the farm

As an educator, Mary wanted Nuzzlets to serve a wider purpose. "Our objectives are to give love to animals that need it and to give free access to therapy and education. And because I was a teacher, we tried to do quite a lot with education."

"It's a double whammy, isn't it? Because you rescue the animals, and then people enjoy them. And it's therapy. And if you can, you can try and educate people as well."

While on the farm, visitors learn about the environment, life cycles and how to care for animals. They can plant wildflower seeds for the bees, learn the importance of composting and use various crafting materials to make bird feeders. Next year, part of their property will be made into a wildflower meadow, bringing more bees and wildlife to the area.

Visitors also get a chance to interact with the animals in a way that is safe for both animals and humans. With support from Mary, Kathy and volunteers, visitors can walk animals on a lead, groom them, pick eggs from the coop and hold and pet animals. Every interaction can be a form of therapy.

Over the years, the charity formed strong links with residential and nursing homes, hospitals for adults with mental health issues, special needs schools and hospices. They have also held special events like summer barbeques and festivities around the winter holidays.

While still working in education, Mary dedicated her evenings, weekends and school holidays to Nuzzlets. When she retired in 2011, she decided to focus on the charity full-time. Having grown up on a farm, Mary understood the hard work and dedication it requires to run a farm.

"We get up before 5am in the summer. This time of year, we're up at 6am and we're out with torches just about to do the morning feed." Kathy, who has a full-time job, cares for the cats and horses before leaving for work. Mary takes care of the rest of the animals. By 10am, Nuzzlets is ready for visitors.



Two guinea pigs standing side by side on the grass

When the pandemic hit, Nuzzlets had to adapt to ensure that the animals as well as the people were kept safe.

"We usually run about 100 rescued animals on site. Since COVID, we probably have fewer than that. We probably have around 50 simply because if we became poorly, somebody would have to look after them."

Despite all the difficulties over the past 18 months, Nuzzlets is still rescuing animals and rehoming as many animals as they can. They have even taken in animals from people unable to look after them due to experiencing symptoms of long Covid.

In order to keep both humans and animals safe, Nuzzlets implemented social distancing measures which has reduced the number of visitors and volunteers on site. Though the way in which visits are conducted have changed, people have still been able to come to the site and spend time with the animals.

"We are seeing a lot of families coming here [with family members] from special needs schools, Martin House, children with autism, children with Down's syndrome with life limiting illnesses and adults with mental health issues...That seems to be working quite well."



Enjoying the sunshine

Mary was recognised in the 2021 New Year Honours List to receive a British Empire Medal for services to children with special educational needs and disabilities. She will be presented with her medal by the Lord Lieutenant of North Yorkshire in a regional ceremony on 20th of October in Bedale.

"The official line will say it was Mary Chapman who got the British Empire Medal. If you looked it up that's what it would say." She says that the award isn't just for her though. It's for her daughter and Nuzzlets co-founder, Kathy, as well as the trustees and many volunteers who have kept the charity running over the years.

When asked what Nuzzlets means to her, Mary replies, "well, it's our life. It's our lifestyle. And if we can get up in the morning to make a child smile then it's been worthwhile."

"Some of the animals here had been so badly treated, but you know, they deserve a fresh start. And if they can then go on and help somebody else, then that's brilliant. Why wouldn't you want to do it? This is what we want to do."

You can find out more about Nuzzlets by visiting their [website](http://www.nuzzlets.org.uk/) (<http://www.nuzzlets.org.uk/>) and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/Nuzzlets-141099826045529) (<https://www.facebook.com/Nuzzlets-141099826045529>) page.

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