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Ruth VanOrden says that she and her new pet parakeet Pal make quite a team.

Photo by Norman E. Pruitt, UMCEs

4-H'ers Train Parakeets As Pals for the Elderly

One year ago, Ruth VanOrden couldn't think of a "single rational reason" to get out of bed in the morning.

A victim of degenerative arthritis, the wheelchair-bound 81-year-old was acutely depressed about her recent move to a Bethesda nursing home — a move precipitated by the death of her only remaining relative.

"I was withdrawing deeper and deeper into myself," says Miss VanOrden, a resident at the Bethesda Health Center. "I don't think I ever felt so totally despondent."

Today, however, the senior citizen insists that she has "never felt better." What's more, she credits her transformation to a "very special therapist" — a therapist with wings.

"Pal gave me a reason to go on," she says, nodding to the pet parakeet that transformed her life. "It may be hard to understand how one small bird can make such a big difference, but believe me, he does.

"He *needs* me. He's attentive when I talk to him. And he accepts me as I am — he doesn't worship youth."

Pal is just one of 100 parakeets who recently have taken up residence in more than a dozen Maryland nursing homes and convalescent facilities.

Donated by local pet shops and non-profit organizations, the parakeets are trained to be friendly by the 27 members of the Montrose 4-H Club.

That training takes each 4-H'er approximately five weeks.

"The birds are completely wild when we get them," explains 14-year-old Sonya Jarmuth, who trained the bright-blue parakeet given to Miss VanOrden. "We have to teach them to be comfortable with people, to perch on hands and shoulders, and to respond to whistles."

Sometimes, confesses Sonya, "It's really hard to give up the parakeets" — especially if a 4-H'er is training a bird for the first time.

"You get to feel amazingly attached to the birds," she says. "Just like the older people who adopt them."

Fortunately, however, the knowledge that the parakeets provide critical companionship for senior citizens almost always outweighs the emotional trauma of surrendering them.

"The kids know that the birds are ideal pets for the elderly," says 4-H adult volunteer Anne Holder, who helped the pet parakeet project take flight. "They're small, affectionate, and easily taken care of."

But even more important, adds Holder, studies conducted at the University of Pennsylvania show that petting small animals like parakeets can actually lower high blood pressure — a major health risk to the elderly.

"There's so much incentive for getting involved," says Holder, "that now these kids' parents are asking if they can train birds too." ●



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