

Animals help people with dementia reconnect

September 2021

CapitalCare Kipnes Centre for Veterans resident Donna McCallum was a “hard working farm mom,” according to her son Stuart, raising her family on a 160-acre farm west of Edmonton in the Winterburn area, along with tending to chickens, pigs, cows, and a huge garden. Years of living with Alzheimer’s disease has left her unable to converse. But as soon as Stuart saw a poster advertising a “petting zoo” coming to the centre, he took time off work and phoned the recreation office to let them know he’d be joining his mom for the event. “I just knew it would mean a lot to Mom,” says Stuart Hewko. “I was hoping it would bring back some memories.”

Immediately upon entering the enclosure, Donna began interacting with the animals. She held a black chicken, watched the goats and pigs, and even looked the donkey and miniature horse in the eyes. Stuart observed his mom’s nonverbal reactions to the farm-like environment, even sharing a moment together gazing at one another, while watching a mother hen and her chicks.

“How wonderful you could have this event,” Stuart told recreation therapist Shauna Kessler. “I’m so glad I could be here to share this moment of connection with her.”

Chicken John’s Petting Zoo visited all CapitalCare centres this summer and came to the Kipnes Centre September 8. The popular activity is made possible thanks to donations to CapitalCare Foundation.



Kipnes Centre for Veterans resident Donna McCallum (left) and her son Stuart Hewko share a connection at the Chicken John Petting Zoo Sept.8, 2021.

