

## **Broward Humane Society's therapy bunny is a 'Ray' of sunshine Cuddly and calm, a large rabbit offers affection to whoever he meets**

By Susannah Bryan  
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POMPANO BEACH

This blind bunny will work for hugs and kisses.

An enormous ball of white, cuddly calm, Ray Charles has distinguished himself as the first rabbit used in animal-assisted therapy by the Humane Society of [Broward County](#).

"Nothing fazes Ray," said his owner Heather Deeley. "Great Danes, cats, people." Being blind may have given Ray that extra dose of chill.

Surrounded on a recent weekday by children at a day care center, Ray didn't flinch, not even with all those little fingers clutching at his fur. "That would torment most rabbits," said Deeley. "Didn't bother Ray. He kept eating."

Someone found Ray last fall, dirty and hungry, wandering through a yard, and dropped him off at the Humane Society on Griffin Road.

He was adopted by Deeley, a behavior coordinator at the center who figured his laid-back ways make him a natural therapist. Studies show that pets can help lower blood pressure and relieve stress, Deeley said.

Ray joined a team of two cats and more than 100 dogs in the program, said Marni Bellavia, who runs the Humane Society's animal-assisted therapy. The animals visit hospitals, nursing homes, day care centers and schools.

To qualify for the program, Ray had to pass an extensive test that evaluated his temperament, sensitivity to touch and comfort level with wheelchairs, walkers and canes. Ray met the requirements: Not too shy and very friendly.

On Tuesday, melancholy faces turned happy at the sight of the giant nose-wiggling rabbit as he was pushed along in his navy stroller at SeaView Nursing & Rehabilitation Center in Pompano Beach.

Nearly 20 residents, including dementia patients and stroke victims, gathered in the courtyard for a chance to hold Ray.

Lee Neely, 40, cradled Ray in his strong arms. "He's soft, feels nice."

Ray snuggled in against Neely's chest before being passed along to Richard Golphin, who held out his arms to gather his "birthday present." Golphin turned 46 on the day of Ray's visit.

"This rabbit is special," Golphin said. "I've never seen a rabbit this big, never in my life."

And so it went. Ray made the rounds, spreading good cheer as his owner carried him through the hallways. One woman, her face blank, two stuffed animals in her lap, lit up as Ray approached. For a minute or so, she held him close, stroking his fur. Then it was time for Ray to go make another friend.

Lots of hugs and kisses later, Ray's visit was coming to an end, but his new pals didn't want him to go.

"One more time?" pleaded one woman, arms outstretched. With Ray in her lap, her face lit up with joy.

For more information about the therapy program, call the Humane Society of [Broward County](#) at 954-266-6856.

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See Ray Charles at a Pompano nursing home at [Sun-Sentinel.com/rabbit](http://Sun-Sentinel.com/rabbit)  
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