Rachael Smith

LL-Wascawwy Wabbits Gwen and George Larue

From afar, the buildings sitting atop the hill on Linden Avenue may look to some as just an old orphanage, but take a few steps closer inside and find that things have evolved in the past 100 years. Now Presbyterian Homes & Family Services have welcomed in some new residents who live in a rustic barn with soft fur and are hopping with excitement.

 Yes, bunnies! George and Gwen Larue have taken their passion with them to work. The Larue’s have been Professional Parents at PHFS for 11 years and work with girls anywhere from 11 to 21. The non-profit organization helps adults, children and families all over Lynchburg and has opened locations in Richmond, Lexington, Fredericksburg and Zuni. “We’re hoping to transform lives by giving people different tools, skills and classes” Communications Coordinator, Kimberly Feldkamp said.

 George Larue has been a lover of rabbits since he was just a boy of six. 28 years ago he decided to become a member of The American Rabbit Breeders Association and had been a licensed registrar for over 20 years now.

 The Larue’s dreamed of one day opening a rabbirty and starting a new program for therapeutic rabbits in the community. Wherever the two went over the years, they asked about incorporating a rabbitry and had no luck until finally, the Presbyterian Home gave the couple a green light.

 “We are the only company in the state of Virginia that has this type of program” George Larue said.

Still, many challenges were to be endured. Gwen and George acquired all state requirements, obtained letters from veterinarians, received a certificate and provided rules and regulations and safety kits.

 All that was left were the rabbits. After George sent a letter to Bob Bennett, author of “Storey’s Guide to Raising Rabbits,” Bennett thoughtfully donated every single one of his bunnies and cages to the Larues.

 “He couldn’t think of a better place for them to go than to these girls” George Larue said.

Since they received their generously donation of very spirited Tans, the Larues have accumulated Lionheads, Flemish Giants and Holland Lops which serve as the therapeutic bunnies.

 The bunnies moved into the barn in December and the Larue’s began to incorporate their girls and the community into their newly established program, “Larue’s Wascawwy Wabbits.”

The girls walk down to the barn with Gwen and George everyday to help feed and nurture the bunnies. Even though the Larues never force the girls to do anything they don’t want, most of them have become quite attached to the pets.

When in need of a quick getaway, the girls head to the nearby barn for quiet time and their bunny-fix.

“Within minutes of picking up a bunny, the stress leaves them and they are less tense. 20 to 30 minutes later and they feel so much better” Gwen Larue said.

 No two rabbits are the same. Each has its own personality and spunk to show off, and they get their chance in rabbit shows. The girls have the opportunity to present the rabbits of one breed and the girl who presented the most information won. This year, the Larue’s took the girls on a trip to Charlestown, West Virginia to see a show.

 “It was fun to see all the different breeds and learn about them. My favorite part was showing them” said a resident at Presbyterian Homes & Family Services and the Family Alliance.

George and Gwen 15 hours a day with the girls and live in campus, so what may look like a Monday-Friday job on paper, in reality is 24/7.

“These two provide the stability and resources and support for these girls. Sometimes they are that rock in their life that they may not have had” Feldkamp said.

Gwen especially is trying to teach the girls mothering skills through the rabbits. A strong sense of responsibility is placed among the girls while holding the bunnies because their biggest fear is being dropped.

“It’s human nature” Gwen says “You want to be loved and you want to share love and that bunny reciprocates everything it receives because its feeling that safety and security.”

“[The rabbitry] has added to my love for rabbits and my understanding of them” another resident said. “It has changed my life in a way and I appreciate the therapy program.”

The Larues also want to use the bunnies in community by offering them for therapy at nursing homes, children hospital wings, Hospice and other organizations like Scouts and 4-H Camps.

“Animals in general are therapeutic” Gwen says. “After five minutes of petting, the stress is released. When I pet my bunnies, I just get all wrapped up and then I have a better day.”

Rabbits serve a greater purpose in life other than breaking into farmer’s gardens and stealing lettuce. In actuality, this theory has been proven to be false. Rabbits have sensitive stomachs and lettuce and all other greens are terrible for them.

These fury and exotic creatures are more than mystical creatures in the backyard who are too quick to catch and offer something even greater than they give on Easter morning.