

# Petting zoo comes to her for 78th birthday

By Judith Prieve [jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com)

ANTIOCH » In all her 77 years, Peggy Thomas never had a birthday party quite like the one her boyfriend arranged for her this week. After all, it's not every day a petting zoo of 17 animals comes to your house. Thomas, who turns 78 on Friday, has stage 4 lung cancer. On Sunday, she was the recipient of An Elderly Wish Foundation's 184th and most unusual wish, courtesy of Frank MacCallister, who applied to the nonprofit for the surprise gift. The foundation grants wishes to Contra Costa County residents 50 years and older who have life-threatening illnesses. "I was speechless," Thomas said, clutching her favorite companion, a black toy schnauzer named Bridget. "I have never had a party like this." Just as friends and family were finishing their birthday cake and ice cream on Sunday, a large truck and trailer pulled up filled with a bevy of beasts eager to frolic in MacCallister's backyard and mingle with party guests. There were black and white rabbits, ducks, two baby pigs, a sheep, a bill goat, a llama, a pony, a miniature horse and a Japanese silkie chicken. Thomas offered her open hand to the curious, wide-eyed llama named Ima, gently petted a miniature pony named Popcorn and scratched her fingers underneath the chin of a black Pot-bellied pig. "This is the best birthday party I have ever had to thank you for a wonderful surprise," she told MacCallister and Elderly Wish Foundation Executive Director Mary Chapman, who were on hand to help her celebrate. Chapman said the petting zoo was a first for the 18-year-old nonprofit, which usually grants wishes such as trips, family gatherings, special dinners and reunions with long-lost relatives. This wish was different in that it came from a friend and was a surprise.

"It was just so heartwarming in that he would want to do something so special for someone it's not every day that you would do something like ordering a petting zoo," she said. "I was happy to help. We all thought it was such a cool idea." MacCallister, encouraged by a friend, said he applied for the wish because he wanted to make this the best party ever for his girlfriend of 30 years who recently was diagnosed with cancer. MacCallister said Thomas, who is retired and lives with her son, Jerry, is a "big animal fan" and also has three Persian cats besides her companion toy schnauzer. "It's something she's passionate about," he said. "It doesn't make a difference what animal it is. She loves them all. They are just very important to her in all varieties, all colors." Although cancer has slowed her down now, MacCallister said Thomas was always active and attended many festivals and fairs over the years, always making a beeline to the petting zoos. "Whenever we went to the Corn fest or the county fair, when we stopped by the petting zoo, she was in there with the little kids, and she was hugging, kissing and renaming every single animal that she could catch," he said with a laugh. "I knew that was my time to take a coffee break. She could spend a couple of hours in there." Thomas' older sister, Betty Lou Brown of Concord, who attended the party along with numerous other family members and friends, says Thomas' love for animals harks back to her early childhood in Walnut Creek when her brother's goat would follow her to school nearly every day and she would have to shoo him back home. "There was nothing in Walnut Creek back then except the creek and walnut trees," she said. "The billy goat knew the way back home." MacCallister agreed that his girlfriend just has "a knack for animals," but Thomas herself says it's simpler than that. "They (animals) just follow me because I am always kind to them," she said. Like the time she cared for a baby blue jay that fell out of its nest, hand feeding him small worms and nursing him back to health until he was ready to fly. She and MacCallister drove across town to release the bird in an area where there were many trees, a habitat she thought they would love. "She is just the kindest person," he said. "I have never seen her angry you never seen her say anything in a state of frustration or anger. She is just the nicest person you would ever meet. Everyone I have introduced her to just loves her. If anyone is ever going to get into heaven, Peggy will get in." Contact Judith Prieve at 925-779-7178.

ANELDERLYWISH FOUNDATION What: Nonprofit that grants wishes to those 50 and older facing a life-threatening illness  
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