



# When a Bunny Changes Your Life...

**W**ho knows what makes a particular animal and human “click”? In the middle of the first magical snowstorm of 2001 I rebelliously bought an adorable bunny that ended up being the love of my life. If only I had known at that moment all he would come to mean to me. Bunnyboy taught me that love can be the driving force to overcome almost anything, especially chronic pain. When people say that their pet saved their life, they usually mean it figuratively. But Bunnyboy saved my life...twice. Literally.

**H**appily settling into my mid thirties, I was pretty sure I had it all. I came from a large, close family and had a wonderful career in executive recruiting. Married with two beautiful children and living in a wooded suburb of New Jersey, I enjoyed being a stay-at-mom who was involved with the children’s school activities and

volunteerism within the community. Then the rug was ripped out from under me. What should have been a routine viral infection was anything but. I contracted Fifth’s Disease from my two-year-old, and the course of my life changed. I began living with chronic debilitating pain from a mixed connective tissue disease and fibromyalgia. I used to pray that I would wake up from the nightmare, but I never did. The dream just faded into the distance.

**I**t wasn’t bad enough that my whole life had changed, but I also had to change my way of thinking. I could not longer say, “I have to get rid of this pain.” I started telling myself, “I need to learn to manage this pain.” Our reaction to pain is completely up to us.

**S**o I used everything I had to fight back. When one terrifying reaction from a pain medication sent me to the emergency room, I

threw the pills into the garbage and stated going to a chiropractor. I scheduled weekly massages for the diffuse muscle pain. At times it felt like a thousand knives were piercing my body. The weight of a light blanket was too painful, and I used to sleep uncovered. I walked on



an underwater treadmill at physical therapy to relieve the pressure on my joints and to strengthen my muscles. I slept on a magnetic mattress designed to alleviate pain. I cringed as small jolts of electricity shot through my body at the acupuncturist. I gave up all sweets and ate a much healthier diet. A psychologist said, “You may never be your old self.” His words angered me and made me that much more determined to control my pain, not let the pain control me. “Chronic pain can put the screeching brakes on your life. It can bully with moods, jobs and relationships.



When the harsh reality finally set in that I would deal with these two diseases for the rest of my life, the decision to have more children was a complicated one. I was willing to take a chance with my health but my husband, understandably, was fearful. That's when Bunnyboy entered the picture. Initially Ward felt like he had fallen through the looking glass as he watched his orderly home being taken over by a lagamorph (rabbit), but he rather quickly fell under the spell of Bunnyboy like the rest of the family.

Bunnyboy suffered more indignities than any rabbit should have to, but his joie de vivre taught us all a thing or two about how to live life to its fullest. He was the unluckiest, but luckiest, rabbit. Unlucky because he was born with a similar immune system disease as me; lucky because we found each other.

At only nine months old Bunnyboy developed a severe jaw abscess. Told that he wouldn't live more than a few months, I went into the same fighter mode for him that I used for my own illnesses. Bunnyboy had

surgery on the abscess despite the fact that rabbits are prey animals and succumb to anesthesia, fear or pain easily, unlike other mammals. Quite simply, they give up easily. But not Bunnyboy. He thrived post-operatively and went on to become an integral part of our family. Wiggling his way into trouble and into our hearts, Bunnyboy hopped freely (around) the

When Bunnyboy's abscess returned two years later, our veterinarian sent us to the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan to receive an experimental treatment for these types of abscesses. Bunnyboy pioneered the use of antibiotic beads placed directly into the site of the abscess thrived again after the surgery. While the chronic infection

had also settled into Bunnyboy's hocks, bandaging his paws daily for six weeks, administering penicillin's shots and giving oral antibiotics just bonded our family all that much more with him.

Bunnyboy still gamboled about the house with a zest for life that I fed off of. Not being able to hop on the furniture temporarily due to his bandages and dealing with the pain in his paws or jaw didn't seem to get

Bunnyboy down. This furry little creature helped me put my pain in perspective. Bunnyboy helped me not to feel so broken. I used to spend much of my time hiding my illness from my children so they wouldn't remember their whole life that they had a sick mom during their childhoods.

"This furry little creature helped me put my pain in perspective. Bunnyboy helped me not to feel so broken, [and]...reminded me that it was ok not to be able to do everything like I used to."

house like an ordinary dog or cat, traveled everywhere with me in the car, became the mascot for the children's sports teams and the live subject of more than one science fair project. He was the breath of fresh air that blew into my life when I needed it the most.



Bunnyboy helped remind me that it was ok not to be able to do everything like I used to. Bunnyboy needed me as much as I needed him.

**C**aring for a loved one is something that I learned growing up when my baby brother was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at the age of four, and my father had his first massive heart attack when I was only thirteen. Illness in a family may involve adjustment on everyone's part but can sometimes bring families closer. In our case, Bunnyboy and I grew closer in sickness and in health.

**S**everal years after Bunnyboy's miraculous surgery, I developed a bone infection that the doctors initially thought was cancer. The surgeon implanted antibiotic beads into my jawbone to save my life. At the time I was on Enbrel (a strong immunosuppressant) and without the beads, the outcome might have been much different. The doctor had just started using the beads on his patients. It was a triumphant moment for Bunnyboy and me.

**B**unnyboy helped save my life a second time. In the middle of a serious flare up of my mixed connective tissue disease, I experienced my first episode of paralyzing fatigue, which is different from profound fatigue. Thankfully Bunnyboy was

perched on my chest, and the phone was nearby. When I tried to get up to go to the bathroom, it was as if my body didn't receive the message. I panicked and asked Bunnyboy to nudge the phone over to me so that I could call for help, and he did.

**B**unnyboy and I were inseparable. He became the third child that I never had, a special needs child. Neither one of us were strangers to pain. His steadfast companionship and love helped me triumph over chronic pain. I was also so busy caring for him that I had very little time to focus on myself. His "never give up or don't sweat the small stuff" attitude was infectious. Sadly, Bunnyboy went into cardiac arrest from a routine penicillin injection that went to his heart. My brother who runs a surgical unit in Estes Park Hospital, Colorado, was visiting and performed rescue breathing on Bunnyboy with the help of my husband. At that moment I thought I might lose him, and I couldn't imagine my life without Bunnyboy. He meant so much to me and to my entire family.

**T**he dozens of patients at the rehabilitation center where he was a therapy rabbit also loved him. Tears rolled down my cheeks when a man with Alzheimer's who had not spoken in months strung together four words, "I pet the bunny," as I placed

Bunnyboy on his lap. Ultimately, whenever we went to leave the center, someone asked us to come back.

**P**lease don't be afraid to get a pet because of the extra work involved in caring for them. When you have a pet, you are actually on the receiving end of pet therapy. Perhaps they make us walk down a flight of stairs to let them out or take them for a walk, or in my case to chase them around the house like a Nascar driver. They make us stretch to clean their litter pan, brush their silky fur, or to snuggle. They stand at our feet and wiggle their little noses or binky across the carpet looking to play, requiring exercise and stretching on our part. What perfect therapy for fibromyalgia? The warmth of a furry pet radiating across your lap can melt away your pain. Pets also teach us about the importance of love and affection. Unconditional love heals. It prolongs and improves the quality of our lives.

**A**t nine years old Bunnyboy died in my arms peacefully. He more than earned his nickname "Iron Bunny" among the veterinarian community. His records are used worldwide for research purposes. ●



*Nancy Laracy with Muffin.*

