



Colin insists on winding down nightly



Colin's hello got shy kids out of their shells



He lives in the moment, rolling in the mud



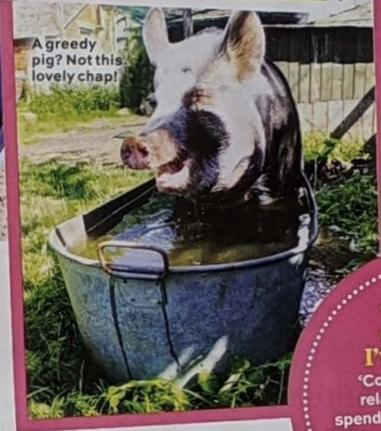
Colin's a playful soul



Hannah has many animals in her therapy team



Colin puts the ham in hammock with his perfect spot



A greedy pig? Not this lovely chap!

# The pig who taught me the meaning of life

**Hannah Clarke was forced to take time out from her busy schedule after an injury. In recovery, Colin taught her the value of a slower pace...**

**'He's perfect,' I said, as the tiny micro-pig snuggled onto my lap. Colin was three months old and I was buying him from a farm in Gloucestershire. But it turned out Colin was no micro-pig. He was going to prove himself to be bigger – and better – than I ever could have imagined.**

I'd loved animals since I was a child. When I started working with young people who had special educational needs, I was introduced to Equine Assistance Psychotherapy – teaming horses with therapy to help people.

In 2010, I qualified as a

psychotherapist and five years later set up Headsight with two colleagues, a therapeutic service we ran from my home in Gloucestershire which fused my two passions – helping young people and loving animals. I soon had dogs, cats, pygmy goats, geese, chickens and guinea pigs helping me aid the children I looked after.

Meanwhile a friend of mine, Drea, set up One Heart Wild, a therapeutic animal sanctuary in Washington, USA.

I'd visit Drea's sanctuary regularly, as we developed an animal-assisted therapy programme together.

At One Heart Wild in May 2018, I first encountered the

magic of pigs. I'd never hung out with pigs before and was amazed at how well people connected to them. I realised in our language, we have so many negative phrases around pigs... fat pig, greedy pig. For people who might have been told they are those bad things, they can feel a connection to these misunderstood animals and might re-evaluate how they perceive themselves.

I thought about some of the children I worked with back home, who have complicated and complex body issues and low self-esteem and knew having a pig in my therapy team would be beneficial.

Three months later, there I

was with Colin in my lap. He started off living in the house with my dogs but by four months old he was too big and bossy for the house. He was such a happy, intelligent boy, who immediately connected with adults and children alike.

I work with children who have experienced trauma and suffer with anxiety, depression and PTSD. An afternoon spent watching Colin roll around in the mud and stride through the farm gave them a boost and helped them connect with their own emotions.

Whether Colin takes part in a therapy session is always entirely up to him. Sometimes, he just wants to sunbathe and

that's fine. But when he engages with a child, he gives them such tender moments, it's overwhelming to witness.

Once I was working with a timid child who had been bullied at school. She'd never seen a pig before and didn't want to get too close, but she squealed from behind his fence. I explained, as I had learned to speak pig by then, that Colin was saying hello to her.

She was surprised and touched that anyone would want to say hello to her. Gently, Colin laid down and she knelt beside him. They had a tender moment of connection which had a profound effect on her and opened up an opportunity for us to talk. The smile on her face was incredible and I was so proud of my gentle, giant pig.

Meanwhile, life was busy and I made no time to look after myself. I was training all over England and driving up and down the country. I felt exhausted and my husband, Tony, was worried about me – but I felt I had too much to do to slow down.

My body had other ideas...

In September 2019, I developed a terrible pain in my neck which got progressively worse. My GP sent me to a physio, who said it was a prolapsed disc. 'It'll take three months of doing very little, to recover,' she warned.

An MRI confirmed the diagnosis and I was told in no uncertain terms I needed to allow myself time to heal. I'd have to stop driving, working at a computer, even sitting up for more than an hour.

Back home, I delegated my appointments to colleagues and prepared for three months' time out. During recovery, I spent a lot of time with Colin. I'd witnessed him work wonders with children in my therapy sessions, but now he was helping me.

I'd sit on a hammock at the end of the garden and Colin would lie down under my feet so I could rub his belly. He enjoyed being sung to, as long as I stuck to Dolly Parton. He made it quite clear he didn't like Abba!

## 'If there's one thing I've learned'

'Colin's the master of relaxing, connecting, spending time in nature and of course, eating well. He's taught me to prioritise these simple yet important needs.'

Just by being who he is, with such emphasis on relaxing, eating well, listening to music and enjoying quality time in the fresh air, he made me reassess my work/life balance.

I needed to slow down, not just for three months, but for good. Now, at 51, I've returned to work, but I've scaled back. And when it's comes to our quality time, Colin lets me know when's best. I lie outside the back door and squeals until I come out. We go down to the hammock and he gets comfortable in his favourite spot, closes his eyes and awaits his lullaby. As far as Colin's concerned, this is a ritual we cannot miss.

He values our time together and that makes me feel loved. No matter what's happened in my day, Colin is my meditation and my moment of peace.

Our friendship isn't about

talking, planning or reflecting, it's about being present. Throughout lockdown, when I worried constantly about global events, Colin helped me feel calm. He was very good at making me realise what truly mattered was the here and now.

Whatever I bring into our space, he irons out for me. I might arrive with my thoughts elsewhere but after half an hour with Colin, my mind is clear – I feel relaxed and complete.

Thankfully, my neck is much better because I shape my day differently. I shape it around Colin, because he is my wellness. When he squeals for me to come outside, it's like he's saying: 'Come on Hannah, stop whatever you're doing. This is our time.' I'm grateful that he does and feel lucky to have a friend who insists I wind down every night.

A few years ago, people laughed at the idea of animal therapy, but scientific evidence has now proved how valuable our four-legged friends are for our mental health. Spending time with animals floods our brains with the feel-good hormones, serotonin and dopamine. Science has proved it – and Colin has too.

● Follow Colin's adventures on Instagram @colinthepig