

Lucky Bunnies



Founder Lawai Diaz cradles a member of the fluffle at Better Bunny in Kahalu'u, the only rabbit rescue organization on O'ahu.

Don't ask Lawai Diaz to choose a favorite. Each one is an individual, says the 16-year-old founder, board chair and executive director of Better Bunny, O'ahu's only rabbit rescue.

Stella the lionhead (the breed has a "mane") is intelligent and "food motivated." The lionhead male, Theodore, is reserved. Wilbur, 11, a mixed breed, is sweet with a grouchy streak. Karamel is a shy Holland lop who warms up with patience. Ripple, a Flemish giant, is the most extroverted of Lawai's five-bunny fluffle.

That rabbits have distinct personalities is a little-known fact.

Another surprise? Bunnies are a lot of work. And they aren't always as snuggly as the adorable stuffed animals they resemble. "Sometimes they don't really ever want to be held, even if you get super close to them," Lawai says. "They're prey animals, and it reminds them of being carried off by predators."

Lawai learned all this when she adopted Cottontail. She was 11 at the time and learned that Cottontail needed ample indoor space, a specific diet and neutering if there were to be playdates. The more she went down the rabbit hole, the more determined

Lawai became to educate others. She discovered a YouTuber who rescued stray and neglected bunnies. Shortly after, Lawai spotted a fluffle of strays near her Kāne'ohe home. She announced her intent to rescue them in a Facebook group of local rabbit owners and, as quickly as rabbits breed (only about thirty-one days of gestation), word spread.

Thus was Better Bunny born. Lawai, who works thirty hours a week at the Haiku Veterinary Clinic in addition to attending high school at Hawai'i Technology Academy, estimates it took her at least two hundred hours to get Better Bunny hopping. Now, a team of about twenty volunteers—mostly adults—works with Lawai. About five of them help catch strays; others foster surrendered and abandoned bunnies and assist with adoptions, which includes vetting prospective adoptive families. Bunnies stay in foster care as long as it takes to be rehomed. Better Bunny has placed fifty bunnies since its inception.

Lawai hopes that if prospective owners have realistic expectations, they'll be less likely to surrender or abandon their higher-than-expected-maintenance pets. Leaving these fragile, domesticated animals to fend for themselves is often a death sentence. And, as a nonnative species, they can damage Hawai'i's ecosystem. Stray rabbits are a problem on O'ahu, Lawai says, and she hopes her organization's efforts will prevent it from getting worse. Money raised from Better Bunny donations and community activities, such as bunny yoga, pays for spaying, neutering and vet care.

Lawai hopes to turn her passion into a career in veterinary medicine. In the meantime, she's finishing high school and bonding with her bunny brood. It's well worth it, she says. "There's something special about having a prey animal trust you. When you get to that point, it's just a very special bond because it's just you and them."

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