



Perfect partners Olivia and Thomas spread a smile

By Lynn Winton

Early one morning, I encountered this twosome on the platform at East Finchley station. Their message, hers on a T-shirt and his on a matching bandana, declared 'Spread a Smile - Entertainment in Hospitals'.

I soon learned that this was Olivia Leich and her Labradoodle Thomas, who work for this eponymous charity that provides entertainment in hospitals all over Greater London.

That morning they were on their way to the children's unit at University College Hospital (UCH), one of 12 hospitals on their rota, where they would meet their team of musicians, magicians and other entertainers to bring joy, laughter and comfort to mainly long-stay patients.

Therapy dog

"In 2017 I had recently retired from my work as a theatre nurse and was looking for a non-clinical role," explained Olivia. "I learned about the charity Spread a Smile through friends who already knew about its work."

"Thomas had exactly the right temperament to undertake the vigorous training to



Double act: Olivia Leich and her Labradoodle Thomas help to bring some moments of joy to patients spending time in hospitals

become a therapy dog. He passed with flying colours, so now we travel by train together all over London, sometimes as far as King's College in Denmark Hill.

"We work with the other entertainers, for instance Thomas has learnt to be a magician's assistant, knowing how

to pick the right card for a card trick. He can also use his paws to ring a bell on command, so he accompanies the singer. But sometimes he is just required to sit quietly on the bed, children find this a huge comfort."

Young patients

Spread a Smile is a relatively



new charity, started in 2013 by two friends from Highgate who witnessed the boredom and loneliness of long-term young patients at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Today, Spread a Smile works with 27 NHS partner hospitals and three hospices,

providing joyful visits, activities, events and treat drops. In addition, with the launch of Smile TV and Smile Spaces in March 2020, the charity also offers digital entertainment for thousands of hospitalised children day and night. Find out more at spreadasmile.org



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Moving drama to tell story of couple's adoption battle

Two theatre producers based in East Finchley are staging their latest production at the Upstairs at the Gatehouse theatre in Highgate until Sunday 16 March.

Hat Townley and Stephen Graham are presenting Too Many Books, a debut play by award-winning journalist Judi Bevan based on the experience she and her husband went through in their struggle to have a family in the 1990s.

After many trials and tribulations, they adopted a baby girl from China. The play takes its title from the comment made about the couple by the UK adoption authorities who turned them down.

The production is directed by Christopher Hunter, a long-time resident of East Finchley, and the strong cast includes local actor Lucy Pickles, a former Fortismere School student. Book tickets at: www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com



In the cast: Lucy Pickles

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