

# Witnessing Joy

Man's Rehabilitation Leads to Canine Therapy Work by DAVID GALLANT

**WITH THE ARRIVAL** of the morning, the rising sun paints the sky with hues of pink and orange. Every day in Binger, Oklahoma, Kenneth Cartwright, also known as Dan, dedicates time to training his Doberman companion, Petra. They embrace a new day outdoors, enjoying the fresh air.

Petra is at his side, and Cartwright walks toward the center of the yard, carrying various tug toys, scent vessels, and leashes. People holding cups of coffee in nearby windows curiously watch the duo's morning routine.

Cartwright's voice resonates through the stillness as he kneels beside Petra, securing her leash with practiced ease. "Are you ready, girl?" he asks as Petra meets his words with enthusiastic wiggles. With a shared breath, they start their regimen, a symphony of commands and movements orchestrated by Cartwright's guiding hand. Petra executes each command precisely, from the simple "Come" to the intricate game of "Find it." She is excited as she eagerly obeys, knowing that treats and praises await her.

## Visits Forge Bonds

After a few hours, Cartwright and Petra seamlessly transition from their morning routine to prepare Petra for visits to nursing homes. Certified by Therapy Dogs International, she profoundly affects the lives of residents. Cartwright says, "Petra loves therapy work. As soon as her red bandanna comes out, she jumps and turns in excited circles."

They have two scheduled therapy visits today. First is the Chickasha Nursing Center, followed by Binger Nursing and Rehabilitation. Petra struts through the main doors at each facility, fidgeting with excitement in anticipation of visiting with each resident. After checking in with reception, she and Cartwright stop by each assigned room.



**Above, Dan Cartwright and Petra are ready for their morning routine.**  
Photo by Hunter Hardin.

Residents such as Melva receive joy and comfort from visits with Petra and Cartwright. After Melva pets Petra, engages in long conversations with Cartwright, and shares laughter, it's time for her to bid farewell as they continue to visit other residents. As Petra and Cartwright turn to leave, Melva's face is sad, and she says, "Thank you for stopping by. You and Petra are the only visitors I get." Petra instinctively nestles her head back onto the bed, sensing Melva's loneliness. Moved by Melva's look, Cartwright says, "We will always visit you when we are in the building."

Melva smiles with tears of joy when they visit. It is an extraordinary friendship, and Cartwright and Petra continue to forge profound bonds with other residents.

## Therapy Works Both Ways

Those visits almost didn't happen. In 2013, Cartwright went through a life-altering accident that left him with numerous fractures, torn ligaments, and constant numbness in his hand. He underwent complex procedures, with teams of doctors meticulously using 38 rods and screws for reconstruction. The recovery period was long and painful. Cartwright put on additional weight while undergoing his grueling rehabilitation.

After the rods and screws were removed, he had to adapt to walking again, relying on a cane for support. It dawned on him that he needed to increase his activity level to lose weight, which would speed

up his physical recovery. He remembered that his sister had stayed active working with her English bulldogs in obedience and therapy work. For years, Cartwright had considered her a “crazy dog woman.” What did she get from all that dog training? However, the more he thought about his sister, the more he wondered if getting a dog might help his physical recovery.

With his sister’s advice, Cartwright decided to try dog training. His fond memories of growing up with gentle Dobermans led him to choose a Doberman to aid his physical recovery. He called his dog Snoop. Cartwright spent hours watching videos and practicing techniques with Snoop. He also consulted the dog community for obedience training tips. His mobility improved over time, and he came to rely less on his cane. Snoop greatly assisted Cartwright’s recovery.

### A New Career Begins

In 2021, Cartwright started Ponderosa Dobermans. Eventually, the demand for his pups grew. He realized he needed a champion sports dog for his kennel. In 2023, he found six-month-old Petra from a Serbian kennel known for producing strong-working Dobermans. He immediately enrolled Petra in obedience classes, where she earned her canine good citizen title and then became a certified therapy dog.

Next, Cartwright branched into scent work, in which dogs search for scented cotton swabs hidden in various locations, with limited time to complete a search. Scent work forges a team bond, in which the handler observes and interprets the dog’s body language. In a trial, a single misinterpretation of the dog’s cues can end a search, requiring the team to try

again the next time. Petra entered her first set of competition trials within a year, taking home multiple titles and awards.

Cartwright has added three more dogs to Ponderosa Dobermans — Sasha, Martha, and Honka. They all attend obedience classes; some of his dogs participate in Mondioring as part of their training routine. This year, he expects a litter of champion working pups from Petra, and he plans for Honka to complete his therapy certification.

Cartwright laughs and says, “We are headed to our twentieth therapy visit, trying to reach the goal of 500. It’s beautiful to witness the joy on the residents’ faces when we arrive.”

Then he adds, “Thank you to my big sis for rubbing off on me.” 🐾

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