

Lessons in Love

Canine Therapy Visits Enrich Classroom by David Gallant | Photos courtesy of Sheri Wetekam

We are going on a car ride! Mom dresses me in my flashy therapy vest and pointy party hat. That means we are going to see the tiny humans. Mom opens the car door and says, “Jump in, Hazel; we are going to school.” I get

excited and bounce from the pavement into the car crate. Then after I stop wiggling and lie down, Mom closes the door.

After several turns, bumps, and stops, I know we are getting close. We take this trip often to Will Rogers Elementary School in

Putnam City. I can tell by the number of turns how far from the school we are. When we pull into the parking lot, I stand on all four legs, let out a small bark, and begin to do my Aussie wiggle dance. The car stops, and Mom gets out.



The students and therapy dog Hazel enjoy quiet time in the reading area of their classroom.

A hat and goggles protect Hazel from the sun and wind during a spin in her remote-controlled car.

She takes so long to open the car door and my dog crate! I always need to potty badly after a long car ride. The parking lot seems way bigger than I remember. The moment my feet reach the grass, I stop and squat. I feel much better.

We walk up to the school's front door, and Mom speaks into a box on the wall. "Can I help you?" a mysterious voice asks. Mom says, "I'm Sheri Wetekam. I'm here with Hazel, my certified therapy dog, to visit Geri Mentzer's second-graders." There is a buzzing sound, and the doors open.

After meeting with the school staff, Mom reaches down and pets me. Wow, that feels good! Then we walk down the long hall towards the classroom. I hear the chatter and giggles of students behind closed doors and can't wait to visit the second-graders. I love seeing the loud and giggly tiny people.

When we enter the classroom, the students shout, "Hazel is here!" Once again, I wiggle and give them a soft "Hello" bark. Mom says I shouldn't bark in class, but I can't help it. I get excited seeing the students wave their arms around, all of them hoping they get to read to me.

My colorful vest and pointy party hat make me look cool as I walk through the rows of tiny desks with the outstretched arms of students eager to pet me. One student pets me with sticky fingers that smell like food. It makes me hungry. My stomach rumbles.

I have a keen sense of smell and can tell when someone is sad or having a tough day. When that happens, I let those students pet me longer, hoping it makes them have a better day.

Reading Partners

My favorite thing about the classroom is the reading area. It is in a carpeted corner and gives me a place to lie down behind a bookcase, which protects the small, quiet space from the main classroom chatter.

The teacher tells Mom the names of the students who need extra help with reading, spelling, or math. While she and Mom are talking, I sneak a peek at the students waving at me, and I start my Aussie wiggle. Mom looks down at me and says, "Hold on, Hazel, I'm almost through talking." I ignore her.

After Mom finishes talking to the teacher, she says, "Let's go for a walk, Hazel."



Excitedly, I turn and start to walk back through the crowded classroom of students sitting at tiny desks and tables. Once again, the giggling students reach out to pet me as I pass, including the one with sticky fingers.

Shortly after we reach the reading area, the students that the teacher told Mom about come over and pick books off the bookshelf. They sit on the floor next to me. One student takes a book, lies on the floor, and uses me as a reading pillow. It makes me feel good knowing I am their comfort reading partner.

For the next hour, each student takes a turn reading to me. If the students get stuck, Mom helps them sound out the words so they will remember them. Sometimes, one of the students will reach down, pet me, and say, "I love you." I never tire of hearing those words.

Fun and Games

After reading, each student takes a colorful

box of crayons and drawing paper from the bookshelf. They draw whatever they like. Some draw pictures of their families, houses, or pets. Others draw pictures filled with random things such as spaceships, trees, people, or food. Sometimes a student snickers, holds the masterpiece up to my nose, and tilts it from side to side so I can get a better view. I pretend to get dizzy, and I roll on my back, hoping to get my favorite belly rubs. It works every time.

One student pushes back my lips to see my teeth and says, "Look, Hazel is smiling!" They all laugh. Another student tickles my toes and teases me with sniffs of the snacks Mom brought for the class. That makes me hungrier.

Before things get too silly, Mom fetches a sight word card game from the bookshelf. It is a game in which the students play against me on one team. They earn a point for each word they say correctly. Otherwise, I win the game point, and the student must put

the card in my therapy vest. The game continues as long as there are cards in my vest for the students to pick. The game ends when no cards are left in my vest, and they have won the most points. I want to win the game one day, but that's unlikely.

It is eye exam day at school. Mom has the doctor check my eyes first so the students won't be scared when it is their turn. To check my eyes, the doctor opens my eyelids wide and looks at my eyes with a tiny light. It makes me have a funny face, and the students giggle. When it's their turn, they ask the doctor "to make their face look funny too." It is a fun game.

Therapy Dogs Help Students

I have a younger sister named Clover, also an Australian Shepherd. We are certified



Hazel the Australian Shepherd therapy dog and her second-grade "tiny people" gather in the reading area of their classroom at Will Rogers Elementary School in Putnam City.

by the Alliance of Therapy Dogs (ATD). Sometimes when we visit places, Mom brings a large sit-in remote-controlled car and dresses Clover or me up in a cowboy hat. We ride the car around the parking lot. The students love watching us drive the remote-controlled car.

Mom started to visit schools in 2014

when Mentzer and Principal John Lund invited her to bring a therapy dog to school for a Dr. Seuss Themed Literacy Night. Mentzer says, "The difference in my class has been extraordinary. The students are eager and excited to read when Hazel walks through the door."

This is just one story about the fun Clover and I have helping students become more confident, reduce their anxiety, and improve their reading and writing. There is room in the schools for many more therapy dog teams, and it would be great if you and your dog trained to be a team and joined us for all the fun times! 🐾

Big Friendly Dog Training is a professional, in-home dog training company that services Oklahoma City and the surrounding areas. We specialize in negative behaviors such as aggression and anxiety. We also have puppy training and basic obedience training programs.

CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE
 405-493-6490 | toll free 800-649-7297
training@bigfriendlydogtraining.com | www.bigfriendlydogtraining.com

**Apple Tree
Antique Gallery**

A Picker's Paradise on
Historic Rt. 66

Furniture | Glassware
Collectibles | Memorabilia
Gotta-Haves

6740 NW 39th Expy | Bethany, OK 73008
405-495-0602