Patty Whitecotton acquired Nick, a purebred German Shepherd, when he was 8 weeks old. She purchased him from Brush Creek Kennels in Stillwater with the intent of using him as a therapy dog. In fact, Patty chose this particular breeder because she breeds for temperament, an important trait in therapy dogs. Even though temperament can be bred into an animal, each therapy dog must undergo training.

Nick attended Puppy Obedience class, Basic Obedience and then passed a Novice Class and Exam. Once he accomplished all that, he was ready for six weeks of therapy dog training. Following that, he had to pass a Canine Good Citizens Test and a Therapy Dog Test, which involved being around wheelchairs, people on crutches and having someone drop a bed pan to simulate some of the things he might encounter in an actual hospital setting. In addition to the training, Nick must work well with other dogs meaning that he can't be an aggressive dog or one that is too interested in other dogs. A therapy dog must be able to pay attention to therapy tasks.

A dog must be at least one year old and mature enough to handle the work before it can be sanctioned as a therapy dog. Nick was 3-years-old before he sat for the therapy dog test. All dogs, similar to people, are different in their personalities and how fast they mature. Often big dogs, like Nick, mature at a slower rate.

"Nick was not as mature at 1-year-old as my first therapy dog had been at that age," explains Patty. "Nick is a very smart dog. When he didn't want to do something, he pretended he didn't understand and he would act like we had never done this task before. We attended novice training three times. The first two times, I didn't even take him through the test; he just wasn't ready."

On the third time through, Patty decided to sit for the test and was pleasantly surprised at the results.

"Nick scored almost perfect," she laughs. "When I called him to come to me, he came part way and stopped rather than coming all the way. He really surprised me that night and I believed that we were going to make it after all."

And make it they did. Nick has gone on to become a model therapy dog. His own veterinarian (Dr. Terry Wood of Mustang) can't believe how well he "works." According to Patty, it has been her practice to take her dogs to the veterinarian for a social visit so they will like going to the veterinarian and won't object when they need to go for medical reasons.

“When we have visited Dr. Wood’s clinic, Nick is jumping all over, free-spirited, curious—just being a typical dog,” says Patty. “When Dr. Wood came to watch Nick work, he was amazed at the transformation. Nick is responsive to my commands, calm and gentle with the patients we visit.”

Nick and Patty do one therapy visit a week, sometimes two. They go to St. Anthony's Hospital where they work with hip and/or knee replacement patients, stroke victims, and three different adolescent behavioral groups—both male and female and some who are sex offenders and/or mentally challenged youth. The duo also works with juvenile sex offenders at St. Michael's.

One of Patty's more memorable visits involves a gentleman in a geriatric/psychiatric unit.

“When we do a therapy visit, we go the hospital where all the patients are brought to a common room,” explains Patty. “The patients sit in a large circle and Nick and I stand in the center. I explain a little about the therapy dog program and give a brief demonstration of some of the things Nick can do. I then go around the circle and let each patient, who wants to, pet Nick. On this particular occasion, there was one gentleman who was outside the circle standing across the room against the wall. When we had gone around the circle, Nick and I went over to him and asked him if he would like to pet Nick? He shook his head no.”

Patty continues saying that she returned to the circle and asked if anyone wanted to pet Nick again. The response was unanimous and the duo went around the circle again. She also took Nick outside the circle and across the room to the gentleman one more time.

“I approached him again and asked, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to pet the dog?’ He reached out and began petting Nick. And then he spoke for the first time that day and talked to Nick for several minutes. You never know what level patients are on—whether they just came to the hospital or if they have had time to get into a medication regime. Often the words they speak to the dog are the first words they’ve spoken since they arrived. The dog helps bring them back to reality.”

Patty says Nick will continue to work as a therapy dog as long as he is able temperament wise and health wise.

“Sometimes as dogs get older, they get arthritis. They may get grouchy as humans do and that wouldn’t be conducive to the work we do,” says Patty. “The Oklahoma City Obedience Training Club re-tests dogs annually to make sure they still know what they are doing and that their temperament is okay. They also bring all the dogs together to be sure they behave around other dogs."

And for Patty, there is one more criterion. Nick must still enjoy “going to work.”

“Nick has a red collar, bandana and leash that he wears when he is working. I wait until the last minute to put them on because when he sees them, he gets all excited. He starts dancing around; he knows he’s going to work.”

When Nick is not working and needs to go out, Patty uses a green colored collar and leash.

“It’s very rewarding. It does as much for me as for the people we visit.”

In fact, Patty feels their therapy visits helped her through a challenging time in her own life.

“I was battling breast cancer. With my doctor's permission, I continued to work and do therapy visits as long as possible. I would go to work, to a cancer treatment and then go home. I was exhausted. On the days I would go to work, to treatment and then to a therapy visit, I felt rejuvenated. It lifted my spirits even if it only lasted for a short time. It really helped me and gave me something to look forward to.”

In January 2007 at the Oklahoma Veterinary Medical Association’s Annual Convention and Expo, Nick was rewarded for his work as a therapy dog. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Animal Hall of Fame. Patty, Nick, and Nick's veterinarian attended the award ceremony. When asked what Nick thought of his honor, Patty had this to say:

“As people began clapping for award recipients, Nick perked up. He thought they were clapping for him because often the groups we visit will clap in appreciation when we are done. I had to explain to him that it wasn’t for him and he just lay back down. He’s a very good dog.”

Patty Whitecotton is a member of the Dean's Development Associates at the OSU Center for Veterinary Health Sciences. She also manages the endowment held with Bank of America Private that supports the Veterinary Center’s Cohn Family Shelter for Small Animals.