

# THE TENNESSEAN

## Couple uses greyhound adoption to rehabilitate prisoners, dogs

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They've shared many things in their married life, and now it's a dog, Bobby Boy, a greyhound, a retired racer who had been around the track one time too many.

Just like they had, in their earlier alcohol- and drug-addled lives.

Panthea and Bobby Aylward have King, another retired racer, in their home, too.

They talk of "Booker," the inmate who, when he was released from prison, left them his picture to show King, so King wouldn't forget him.

"Booker, all the guys, all of them, took the dogs in and poured love on them," Panthea says. "...Prisoners can be tough to crack, but the greyhounds...they had those guys fawning like fools."

Panthea and Bobby Aylward know about prison. They've been on both sides of the wall several times, first as inmates, now as employees who have introduced a novel approach to rehabilitation: a greyhound adoption program where inmates help prepare the dogs for life in a home setting.

The idea for the program was Panthea's; her husband wrote the proposal for her.

"I had house-sat for a friend who had a greyhound," Panthea says. "It was such a wonderful pet. . . . I went home and asked Bobby what he thought of taking dogs into the prison. We both



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Panthea Aylward pets Bobby Boy as Bruce, right, relaxes after running around the yard at the Corrections Corporation of America prison off Harding Place. SANFORD MYERS

knew the pros and cons of prison life. I thought such a program would help both the inmates and the dogs."

After sorting through all the red tape, the couple began working with retired greyhound advocates who helped Panthea and Bobby start the program. Inmates and animals bonded. "They nurtured each other," Panthea says.

"The greys, they give us a chance to be affectionate," inmate Daniel Baker says. "I've done things. . . . I guess some of us could be called career criminals, but the dogs, they've made me want to live like I did when I was a kid."

Tammy Collins, assistant warden at the prison — Metro Detention Facility on Harding Place, run by Corrections

Corporation of America — brags on Panthea and Bobby's contribution to the men's prison: "Life is, well, it's less stressful. The men who have worked with the dogs seem so much less stressed. They're calmer."

Before the dogs, inmate Baker says, the razor wire reminded him of his "home in hell."

"Since the dogs, well, I'm a different person. I ain't so mad all the time."

Panthea and Bobby Aylward knew the anger that broiled in those on the wrong side of the law.

They witnessed it as prisoners, and today, they understand it as counselors at the prison where they've worked since 1998.

"I was incarcerated many times,"



says Panthea, who is working toward a degree in psychology. “I know having someone or something to metaphorically lick your face and wag its tail when it sees you helps you.... People aren’t born bad... They turn bad. Life isn’t equal. Love isn’t equal. But those greyhounds ... they don’t care how many times you broke the law. If you like them, they will love you.”

That love, she says, can be a key to the straight life.

## Looking back

Bobby had his first drink at 5 — Scotch on the rocks — at one of his dad’s poker parties. Panthea had hers at 9 — a kid’s crazy concoction of beer and bourbon and vodka — when she baby-sat for her sister.

Bobby drank to impress his dad, the man who ran his home like the regimented Marine that he was. When he drained the glass that long-ago night, his dad put him on the floor and watched him bounce off the walls as he staggered to his room.

The then-5-year-old wet the bed after his first binge. His father whipped him for not holding his liquor like a man.

Panthea drank to escape a pain so piercing that she’s not prepared to share it with the world.

The then-9-year-old kept her trauma a secret for years, and she still pretty much does unless she’s talking with professionals.

The 5-year-old is now 48; the 9-year-old, 46.

Panthea met Bobby when they were both prisoners at CCA institutions, she at the women’s prison, he at the men’s.

She was giving a speech on pursuing a drug- and alcohol-free life.

“I wanted to meet her,” Bobby says. “She was such an inspiration, because we later found out that both of us were imprisoned for drug-related crimes. Over and over, and over and over.”

Their lives collided when they saw each other in various substance abuse meetings on the outside, and with time, the two recovering addicts fell in love.

## Looking forward

Bobby and Panthea have been drug-free for years now, happy with their Antioch home, their prison work, their newly adopted grey.

“I know how important it is for inmates to have positive forces in their life,” Panthea says. “I know how you have to be able to love yourself and how you have to be able to love others.... That’s how I envisioned the dogs in the prison’s new program.”

The dogs, she believes, have been some of the most positive influences the men have had. The dogs, the men say, give them a reason to get up and move beyond themselves.

They brush the dogs’ teeth and exercise and socialize them. They see the similarity of their lives in a cell and the dogs’ lives in a crate, the way they once lived.

Panthea introduced the program to the men two months ago. The men have worked with the greys eight weeks. Now, the dogs, all four of them, have been or will be adopted. In a way, Panthea says, the prisoners

hated to see the dogs graduate into permanent homes.

On the other hand, she says, they stand like kids at Christmas, awaiting the second batch of dogs they will work with.

“The inmates who work with the dogs sort of live life in two-month installments,” she says. “It’s not like a sentence ... which sometimes never seems to end.”

Panthea looks up and beyond the razor wire surrounding the field where she and her team of inmates watch the dogs run and jump and chase a ball.

The inmates are laughing, cheering the dogs.

Panthea Aylward is crying, cheering the men.

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### Adoption info

To adopt a retired racing greyhound and learn more about those socialized and trained by inmates at the Metro Detention Facility run by Corrections Corporation of America on Harding Place, call Sharron Lane at 418-7216 or e-mail her at mcroopers@hotmail.com.

The adoption fee is \$230, which includes neutering, teeth cleaning, heartworm testing and current vaccinations. Prospective owners have to pass a home visit and other criteria.

The dogs generally will be approximately 3 years of age and will have completed basic obedience training. The new prison program is done in conjunction with the nonprofit Greys Matter Adoption. The inmates hope to socialize five or so dogs for adoption every eight weeks.