



ON THE TRAIL

Jennifer Lettich-Snyder (center) participates in a mock search exercise with her husband, Ken, and bloodhound, Penelope Joan. Opposite: Lettich-Snyder on the ground responding with the fire service.



CLINIC CHAMPIONS

Jennifer Lettich-Snyder, CVT, CCRP

Ashland, Pennsylvania

If you ever happen to find yourself lost in the woods of rural central Pennsylvania, you'd be very fortunate to come across Jennifer Lettich-Snyder, CVT, CCRP, and her 6-year-old hound mix, Charlotte.

And many have. Lettich-Snyder, an emergency responder and search-and-rescue handler, teams up with Charlotte, certified in trailing and human remains detection, to give back to her community in a way that few can. She has responded to about 25 search-and-rescue calls this year alone, taking either Charlotte or one of her other 2 certified dogs to find missing persons or assist in any way on calls that can sometimes stretch for 4 to 5 days.

“We’ve assisted some cold cases with Charlotte, we’ve helped with the FBI and a few different things,” she says. “Those are the rewarding moments, just to be able to bring closure and bring that loved one home.”

Lettich-Snyder rarely sits still between her full-time job as a veterinary nurse, her passion for search and rescue, and caring for her own ark-load of pets (9 dogs, 2 rabbits, 25 chickens, and a horse). But that’s how life has always been for Lettich-Snyder, who constantly seeks out new opportunities to grow as a person and professional.

“Jen is always looking to better herself and those around her on the team,” says Terry Wise, chief, Pennsylvania Canine Search and Rescue. “I would say that is where she excels in helping others learn and succeed. She reaches out to as many people as she can and attends seminars to learn all that she can. She has learned how to bring this back to team members and share with them how to become better.”

Heather Libby, a client services representative who has worked with Lettich-Snyder for nearly a decade, adds that “she is an amazing person and she always keeps herself very busy. Jen’s passion for her job, animals, and helping people is where she shines.”



Most of Lettich-Snyder’s interests stem from a love for animals, ever since she was 16 years old and was left to perform nursing care for her severely injured dog. She’s done the same for countless animals since then, starting her work in veterinary medicine professionally in 2005. “This is where my heart is; this is where I belong,” says Lettich-Snyder.

But she also gives back in other ways. More than 20 years ago, Lettich-Snyder started volunteering as a firefighter and first responder for the Sacramento Community Fire Company. While her involvement has slowed down since she started working in search and rescue, she has still had the chance to respond to natural disasters, fires, and other emergencies. Lettich-Snyder’s volunteer and professional work embodies the strengths that veterinary nurses display in the clinic daily: versatility, confidence, and a willingness to take on any task at hand.

We spoke with Lettich-Snyder to learn more about her work and how all of her interests help build her confidence and skills in the veterinary hospital.



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CLINIC CHAMPIONS

Every day, veterinary nurses/ technicians make a positive impact on their clients, patients, coworkers, and greater community. But the stories behind each and every one of these

professionals are often overlooked due to the selfless nature of working in veterinary medicine.

Today's Veterinary Nurse aims to shine a light on some of these stories with its Clinic Champions series. Each issue, TVN and Midmark will honor a veterinary nurse for their contributions in community service, scholarship, advocacy, or innovation. This series will highlight unsung heroes who make a lasting impact on their patients and community.

At the end of the year, 1 of the 4 honorees will be recognized as the Clinic Champion of the Year. This individual will receive a trip to VMX 2024 in Orlando, Florida, including registration, hotel, and airfare, or an equivalent award.

→ To nominate a veterinary nurse/technician, visit bit.ly/ClinicChampions.



TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: What does your emergency response work involve and how did you get started with that?

JENNIFER LETTICH-SNYDER: I owe it all to my big brother. He got me involved with our local fire department when I was growing up. I've been in the fire service for over 20 years. There's been a few calls that he had responded to where an individual was lost, and the lack of qualified people in our area was a big thing affecting the response time. Even in the fire department, they don't teach you much about looking for missing people; search and rescue is its own thing. Once I realized that, I thought I would love to do that one day. You even get the opportunity to work with a canine. Because I love dogs so much, that was a bonus.

I had gotten a dog several years ago, named Laila, and my goal with her was to do search and rescue. We started out with basic obedience and all the training with that. And then some things happened in my life, and I was not able to complete it with her. She had just turned 6 years old at that point, and she started to get

really sick. She ended up having a very rare brain tumor. A few days after that, one of my coworkers called me and said, "Hey, we had an incident with another dog. Mom killed the babies and bit some people." There were some unfortunate situations involved with that. She said, "We have this one puppy left, and it's a little hound mix. Would you like to take her?" My husband wasn't thrilled because we already had so many dogs, but I brought her home one day and did some tests on her. She had such drive and motivation; I thought, this could be my opportunity. Now my little puppy—her name is Charlotte—she's just turned 6. Since then, I also got a bloodhound, and she's working on trailing. I have another little guy that I got just to be a pet. But he has a huge drive and loves to work, so he's being trained for human remains detection. I'm working 3 dogs right now.

TVN: What does it look like when you get called upon and have to go out with Charlotte?

LETTICH-SNYDER: There have been a few really awesome experiences. One was locally where Charlotte



READY TO RESPOND

While Lettich-Snyder has volunteered with the local fire service for 2 decades (left), she also has a passion for teaching and leading in search and rescue (right).



actually had her first assist—although she wasn't technically the first one to the person. She was in pursuit of the trail, and we radioed to another crew member, who did not have a canine, which direction Charlotte was headed. If I recall correctly, it was up the steep side of a mountain and my 3 flankers were firefighters. It was a cold winter evening, and the person we were trying to locate had a speech impairment. They were trying to call him, but the calls kept getting dropped, and no one could understand what he was saying because of his speech impairment. That's when I got my harness and got the dog going. She started trekking up this trail and going across the mountain. There was radio communication to another team that I knew was up on the other side of the mountain. I told them, "My dog's heading this way; take your team in that direction," and that ended up being an assist. It was really exciting. I had to give my backpack and the dog to somebody else so I could help assess the patient. The other crew member and I tended to him, and then we got him out of there safely and called for a UTV (utility terrain vehicle) to take him out.

TVN: How has this experience helped in your work in veterinary medicine and vice versa?

LETTICH-SNYDER: Search and rescue has really helped me build my leadership and my confidence. I was a poor public speaker and moving into this realm of work really helped me with that. I've been put into a leadership role in search and rescue as a lieutenant for one of our canine teams, and they actually put me in charge of their human remains detection program. I love that someone saw how much passion I had for that particular discipline and said, "Here, do this, we'll help you along the way." That really helped me grow as a veterinary technician because I needed to be a stronger leader—there are some areas where I was a little bit weak. I really feel that made me stronger. Just being able to see different things that happen in search and rescue, with family emotions and stuff like that, it really helps me with some of my coworkers who may be battling things at home. It helped me realize that I need to make sure that I'm a better supporter of that, because in difficult times, your mind goes all over the place. I think that's important.

Another thing: Being a veterinary technician, I'm already really good at reading canine behavior and their body language. We had a few dogs injure their toenails or have little cuts, and I can help them right away. My teammates love me for that, so it's an extra bonus. But the behavior thing is really important because you have



BEHIND THE SCENES

In the clinic, Lettich-Snyder has a passion for rehabilitation, client education, and training her team on new products and techniques.

to be able to watch what the dog is doing—they might catch something, and they'll just flick their ear a certain way. And it's really important to catch that subtle behavior. Having that extra medical background to help with little things until we can get them to the emergency center is also great.

TVN: What did you learn through that process of becoming more confident as a leader and in communication? What would be your advice for someone who's going through the same thing?

LETTICH-SNYDER: It's really hard to recognize the things that you need to improve. That's the first step: recognize something is happening, something is pushing you to feel a certain way, and then capture that moment. Ask yourself: "Do I really need to be that upset about this particular thing?" Let me hash it out with somebody; let me see what they think. Get some feedback and let's turn it into some sort of positive. If not, what can I do to change it? I think that recognition is important and then capturing it and trying to pull the positive out, because I struggled with that. I was like, "No, I don't need to have a bad day



CLINIC CHAMPIONS



NEVER STOP LEARNING

Lettich-Snyder has 3 dogs that are either certified in various search-and-rescue skills or undergoing training.

every day.” I try to find a positive to get through the day because we don’t know that we have tomorrow.

TVN: Why do you dedicate the time to all of these passions in addition to your career?

LETTICH-SNYDER: I feel like these things are what help build my purpose. These things are why I’m here. My husband and I are not able to have children, and because I try to find reasons and purposes for everything, I feel like this is my purpose. I’m here to help others, help them succeed, and help them move on with their dreams.

TVN: How do you view the function of mentorship and helping younger early career veterinary nurses in developing their skills?

LETTICH-SNYDER: I love teaching; I think helping anyone is important. I think new veterinary nurses need someone who’s going to take them under their wing, show them what the ropes are like, let them move forward, and always let them know you have their back. Be someone who will tell them, “If you need something, if you have a question, here’s my email, here’s my phone number, please reach out.” Because if we don’t help them and support them, we’re going to lose them. We know what the statistics are for veterinary nurses: we lose them in the first 5 years. It could be financial, it could be other things at home, or it could just be lack of support in the veterinary setting. And if they have a good mentor, we can hopefully retain them. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**



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