

Dogs belonging to soldiers being cared for while they're away

- By HEATHER TOMLINSON, CJ Staff Writer
Commonwealth Journal

- Aug 22, 2010

-



Miche Branscum plays ball with Leonidas at Trinity Springs Park on Saturday. Miche and her husband Kevin are fostering Leo through the GASP program while his owner is serving in the military.

At first glance, it appears Leonidas is right at home with his family during an outing to Trinity Springs Park in Somerset. The pit bull seems well adjusted, besides having a bad habit of jumping on people to greet them — something brought on by his smaller friend, Liberty. But upon closer inspection, one discovers the real story behind Leo. Kevin and Miche Branscum, of Somerset, and Liberty are, in fact, Leo's family, but he has another family. One that's counting down the days until his duty in the military has been completed and he can bring his beloved pet home again. Miche and Kevin became involved in the "Guardian Angels for Soldiers' Pets," or GASP program, several months ago. The couple, who have two other dogs besides Liberty and, for now, Leo, were inspired to get involved by a news program describing GASP and its mission. And its mission is this: When a soldier finds himself or herself looking at a time away from home, whether that be for training stateside or for a long deployment overseas, GASP is there to care for their pets while they're away. "They (foster families with GASP) are having a big surge out of Fort Campbell right now," Miche said. Miche is the Kentucky Community Outreach Liaison for GASP — the first officer in Kentucky — and she said there's a need for a greater awareness of the program, which gives soldiers peace of mind while they're away from their pets. "It's just a need," Miche said. "It's a way of giving back to people who already give a lot." Leo's owner, or "Dad," is hoping to be able to welcome his pet back home in February, but there's a chance of a deployment on the horizon, and so Miche and Kevin are preparing to keep the pit bull for longer, if need be. Not that it's a problem for the family. They've grown to love the rambunctious dog, which has a love for playing ball and an innate friendliness for anyone willing to give him a pat on the head or back. But Leo is luckier than many pets. Some soldiers are forced to leave their animals at shelters and with humane societies during their time away, and sometimes, the odds are against dogs like Leo. "These are the typical types of dogs we get," Miche said in reference to Leo's powerful breed. Miche said many soldiers keep larger breeds, such as pit bulls and Rottweilers. That can automatically turn potential adopting families off when searching for a new pet for their home. "The big guys like this don't get adopted in shelters," Miche said. That's why the GASP program has seen so many inquiries about fostering from soldiers all over the United States. While the organization isn't new, it still hasn't saturated Kentucky as it has other states, and many soldiers in Kentucky see their dogs and other pets fostered in Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee while they're away. Miche said there's always a need for GASP foster families, and she said it's far too often she comes across instances in which soldiers don't know about the program. The Branscums themselves had no idea such a program existed until just a few months ago, but now that they're taken in their first foster, Leo, they intend to participate as a foster family for years to come. And Leo will probably always hold a special place in their heart — although his life with them did take some adjustments. "The first morning we had him, Leo got Kevin up at 5

a.m. in the morning wanting to go run because that's when his dad took him," Miche said. Leo's owner, who is stationed at Fort Knox, gets to visit with the dog on occasion, and Miche said his love of the dog — and how much he misses him — is obvious. "During the visits, he just stares at him (Leo)," Miche said. But he knows Leo is in safe hands, which belong to two people who have grown to love the dog. "It'll be sad when he (Leo) goes home, but at least he's going back to his family," Miche said. For more information about the program, go to www.GuardianAngelsforSoldiersPet.org, or e-mail Miche Branscum at gasp.outreach.ky@gmail.com.