

# Group cares for soldiers' pets

By Wendy Schultz



STEPHANIE TAYLOR holds Athena, her foster pit bull, who belongs to a deployed military couple. Democrat photo by Shelly Thorene

EL DORADO — There are a lot of things to take care of when a soldier is deployed, a lot of things to worry about. One of the biggest concerns is what to do with their pets. Sometimes a friend can be found to pet-sit, sometimes the only options are an expensive boarding kennel or surrendering the pet to an animal shelter where they may be euthanized.

As Stephanie Taylor, California state director for Guardian Angels for Soldiers' Pets (GASP), prepared to say good-bye to Athena, the 2-year-old pit bull she's been fostering for seven months at her home near the town of El Dorado, there were bittersweet thoughts.

"It will be interesting to see what Athena's reaction will be," said Taylor, who has a number of rescue animals. "She's very sensitive and shy."

Taylor hadn't yet met Athena's owners, Naval officers Sykeshia Thurman and Alex Trefilek, who drove up from San Diego to reunite with their dog.

Thurman was deployed to Japan, Thailand and Indonesia at the same time that Trefilek was deployed to Bahrain. Thurman was worried about where to put her two dogs and Trefilek's Athena. Time was running out when she stumbled across the GASP Website.

"Within 48 hours, we got a reply. This program saved our family. Stephanie loved Alex, Athena and (me) like she'd known us our entire lives," Thurman e-mailed to the Mountain Democrat. "Athena was a little confused at first — now she won't leave Alex's side."

Lucy D'Mot of Pollock Pines is getting ready for Roxy, her first foster dog. The 2-year-old cattle dog's owner is preparing for deployment and Roxy will be with D'Mot for six to nine months.

"I had cattle dogs for a long time, but the last one recently passed on," said D'Mot. "I missed having a dog, but winter up here isn't a good time to get a pet and I wasn't ready yet. I was checking with the Cattle Dog Rescue when I saw a news article online about Guardian Angels for Soldiers' Pets. I thought fostering a soldier's dog for a few months would be good for the short-term."

D'Mot isn't sure what to expect, but she's reinforced the fencing in her yard and is looking forward to meeting Roxy and her owners.

Guardian Angels for Soldiers' Pets is a non-profit organization started in 2005 by two women, Linda Spurlin-Dominik and Carol Olmedo, when they learned that many military service personnel being deployed had no one to care for their pets and had to face relinquishing their animals to animal shelters or rescue groups.

The organization offers three programs for deployed military service personnel and veterans who have become homeless or hospitalized: a foster pet program, military pet assistance for emergency hardship cases and a military and vet pet sanctuary in Gatesville, Texas, for pets that have been unable to find foster homes. They have foster pet volunteers in every state.

Taylor, 55, became a foster pet volunteer after she saw a segment on the "Today Show" featuring GASP.

"We take all pets, from iguanas to horses and goats, and give them healthy, loving homes," said Taylor, who has two dogs and a few goats of her own. "The dogs and cats must be neutered and we can take them for up to 24 months, although sometimes volunteers will take them longer. Many take multiple pets."

Most of California's 200 volunteers are in Southern California, but Taylor is trying to get the word out to soldiers and potential volunteers in Northern California.

"Soldiers don't seem to know about the program up here and my volunteers are wanting animals," said Taylor. "We try to get the animal placed in 24 hours of being notified of the need." She e-mails a photo of the animal and a blurb about its needs and personality to volunteers like Kay and Jerry Belluomini of Rocklin who took in two bull terriers for a Marine who was being deployed to Afghanistan.

"No one would take the pair of them," said Kay Belluomini, "and Nicole (Marine) was getting desperate because they were her babies." Belluomini and her husband had recently signed up to be foster pet volunteers after the loss of three of their animals. "We wanted another dog, but didn't want the commitment of years and years.

"Two bull terriers, a year old and weighing 50 pounds each, was a lot to take on," said Belluomini, "but we fell in love with them and with Nicole."

The dogs had never been trained and were a little wild, but the Belluominis were used to animals and patiently trained them. Kay e-mailed Nicole once a week, sending photos of the dogs playing, opening their Christmas stockings. Belluomini's extended family became involved, sending care packages to Nicole in Afghanistan with needed items.

"My nieces and nephews wrote her letters and she sent teddy bears back for them. It was a good learning experience for them and it was nice to be able to do something for our soldiers," said Belluomini.

The Belluominis had the dogs for 16 months and are now waiting for another pooch. Kay's brother is fostering a cat and one of her friends signed up to be a volunteer as well. "It was a ton of work, but it's a wonderful, wonderful program," said Belluomini.

Although foster pet volunteers' services are free, most soldiers arrange to pay for food and medicine for their animal. Some of the volunteers are dog trainers or breed specialists and often the animal is better trained when it leaves the foster home than when the volunteer got them. Some receive special training to deal with "bully dogs" — pit bulls, German shepherds, Rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, bull terriers and Great Danes — often favorites of military personnel.

"I would never have had a pit bull of my own," said Taylor, "but Athena was so smart and she'd been moved around — I had to take her. Bully dogs have a longer adjustment period than other dogs."

Athena slept on Taylor's bed, sharing the space with Jet, Taylor's American Eskimo dog and Sebastian the collie.

Foster pet volunteers keep in contact with soldiers through e-mail, letting them know how the pet is doing and becoming friends in the process. Some continue to keep in touch even after the pet and soldier have been reunited.

“We treat the animals like they are our own pets and the soldiers are so grateful to have a loving home for them,” said Taylor. “I feel very privileged to be able to do this, but you have to have some backbone to do this job.”