

Homecoming a tail-wagger



Chris Parker/Times News John Donato gets a hospital visit from his black Lab, Diesel.

Published July 02. 2011 09:02AM

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JoAnn Pilston left her Walker Township home for Blandon, Berks County, early on May 28, an exuberant, 80-pound black Labrador Retriever named Diesel grinning in the back seat.

The two had taken road trips many times before, driving to visit Diesel's owner, Vietnam veteran John Donato, at the Lebanon Veterans Hospital. But this journey was special: Donato was finally out of the hospital, and Diesel was on his way home. Pilston and her husband of 23 years, Neil, had fostered Diesel under a program called Guardian Angels for Soldiers Pet. Pilston arrived at Donato's 1700s-era rural home a couple of hours after he had come home from U.S. Veterans Medical Center in Lebanon, where he had been for 19 months." Diesel was so excited. He knew when we were pulling up the driveway where we were going. I let him out of the Jeep, and he just went tearing toward the house," Pilston said. She opened the front door, and Diesel went running up to Donato, stopping the dog just as he was about to jump into Donato's lap. Donato had had surgery at the Philadelphia Veterans Hospital on April 18 to close a hole in his intestine and remove scar tissue from a previous operation. He continues to use a wheelchair and, on good days, a walker." Right away, Diesel was just kissing John all over the place - he loves him to death," Pilston said. Donato said that after greeting him, his beloved pet raced from room to room, sniffing and exploring the home he had not seen in more than a year. Then, Donato said, Diesel ran outside to the small creek he loves to play in, and then to a neighbor's to say hello." He was so happy to be home," Pilston said. As for Donato, 61, the joy he felt at being reunited with his dog far outshone the relief he felt at finally being home." It was a feeling of closure, relief and hope," he said. "It made me realize that a particularly difficult period was ending and that any problems in the future could be overcome." Donato enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at 22, just after graduating from Penn State University with a degree in anthropology. He served 18 months in Vietnam. In November 2009, Donato's friend, Dennis Straub, found him lying on the floor one day, so sick he couldn't move. It turned out that Donato had a strangulated hernia that had become infected. Straub called 911, saving Donato's life. Donato had surgery to fix the hernia, but all did not go well. Eventually, he was admitted to the veterans hospital to have more surgery to repair a large hole in his stomach and fix his small intestine, residual damage from the hernia problem. The additional surgery finally came about a year and five months later. About two weeks after Donato's surgery in Philadelphia, he returned to Lebanon VA Hospital to recover, and was told he would go back to Philadelphia in about a week later to have the sutures removed. After four weeks, he was still waiting. By that time, Donato, an independent man used to being active and calling his own shots, was desperate to go home." I said, my truck's sitting out in the parking lot. I'm going home," Donato recalls. On May 28, he checked himself out and drove home, with an appointment to return about 10 days later to have the sutures removed." It took them about five minutes," he said of the procedure. After driving the 40 miles from the hospital to his 1700s-era home, Donato struggled to get from his pickup truck to his front door. Once inside - he had to move aside a pile of wood to get through the door - Donato was relieved to be home, but sad and angry that a man he had trusted to care for his home had left the place in chaos. Donato still needs bowel surgery. "They were going to try and reverse the colostomy at the same time (as the April 18 surgery),

but because it took more than seven hours to do the first one they felt it was too risky to try, so that's why we have one more surgery in the future," he said. One recent day, Donato invited a visitor into his living room, smiling and shaking his head when he sees the sofa cushions on the floor. Diesel, it turns out, loves to plow under the cushions, knocking them down. The dog enthusiastically greets the visitor, dashing from Donato to the visitor to Straub and back again, a circuit of slobbery dog kisses and tail-wagging." He'll settle down," Donato said. He scolds Diesel, but the smile in his voice belies his stern command. Were it not for the Pilstons and Guardian Angels for Soldiers Pet, Donato would probably have had to give Diesel up. Finding long-term care for the energetic Lab was impossible. Donato has no family nearby, and friends were unable to provide the attention Diesel needs. Foster families provided through a Berks County animal rescue organization were not good fits. Guardian Angels became involved in April, 2010. Linda Spurlin-Dominik and Carol Olmedo founded the organization in Arkansas in 2005 after learning that many about-to-be-deployed military personnel were forced to relinquish their beloved pets because there was no long-term care available. Someone at the veterans hospital mentioned the group, so Donato did some research and contacted the group. Soon, he heard from the Pilston's. JoAnn Pilston had six Seeing Eye dogs, and was looking for another dog to foster. Guardian Angels was a perfect fit. It was also a perfect fit for Donato and Diesel." I don't know what I'd have done without them," Donato said.