

Guardian Angels



CHRIS PARKER/TIMES NEWS JoAnn and Neil Pilston of Walker Township with Diesel. The couple is caring for Diesel until his owner, a Vietnam vet who has been hospitalized for a year, can once again take care of him.

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It's a sunny Friday morning, and Vietnam veteran John Donato lies in his bed in his room in the Veterans Medical Center in Lebanon.

He's been there close to a year, waiting for surgery to repair a large hole in his stomach and fix his small intestine, residual damage from last fall, when his hernia strangulated and became infected. Donato, 60, 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. Lately, he's been feeling blue, not surprising given his year of pain and confinement in the small room, crowded by medical equipment. On a shelf above his bed, a pair of athletic shoes sit, one turned on its side. Donato won't be using them anytime soon. But he breaks into a grin as 80 pounds of doggy exuberance bounds through the door and onto the bed. Diesel, Donato's almost-5-year-old black lab, works hard to contain his excitement at seeing his master. Gently, he settles down, stretches out and gives Donato a kiss. Donato whispers hello, and offers the dog a piece of banana. Diesel accepts the treat with surprising delicacy. Were it not for JoAnn and Neil Pilston of Walker Township, who are fostering Diesel under the Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet program, Donato would probably have had to give up his beloved dog. He has no family nearby, and caring for the energetic lab a canine Mack truck in high gear requires more time and attention than his friends, though willing, were able to provide long-term. "I feel so much better. I was a wreck" when Diesel was twice under the care of foster families provided by a Berks County animal rescue organization, Donato says. Neither worked out. JoAnn Pilston brings Diesel for visits every few weeks, driving the 60-some miles from her home. "He knows when we're going to see John," she says. "He'll sit by the door. Let him out, and he'll sit by the car for a half-hour while you're getting ready to go. He knows. "Diesel isn't the only canine who visits the hospital. Therapy dogs are a welcome sight for many of the ailing and often aged veterans. A staff member says visiting dogs must have copies of their vaccination and other records on file at the hospital, as Diesel does. As Pilston and Donato talk about Diesel and the Guardian Angel's for Soldier's Pet program, hospital staff drop by to tend to Donato's medical needs and just to say hello. Diesel greets each one with tail-wagging enthusiasm. It was in April when Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet brought the Pilstons and Diesel together. The group was founded in Arkansas in 2005 by two women, Linda Spurlin-Dominik and Carol Olmedo. They started the group, Spurlin-Dominik says, "after we learned, via Internet research, reading various articles, and speaking with military organizations and families across the country, that military service members across the country had pets and needed a caring, loving, and safe home to care for them during the pet owner's deployment to fight the global war on terrorism (combat or peacekeeping or humanitarian missions), but had not been able to find someone to care for them." Military pet owners were often forced to hand their pets over to animal shelters, never knowing whether the animal would be adopted or euthanized." Somebody here said, hey, we think we found this place. It's called Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet," Donato says. The person Donato remembers making

the suggestion did not respond to a request for comments. Donato searched the Internet, found the details and contacted the group. "They said, 'Yep, we'll take care of him.' The next thing you know, I got a phone call from JoAnn," he says. For the Pilstons, Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet was a natural fit." I had raised six Seeing Eye dogs, and my last Seeing Eye dog was back at See Eye in training. In the meantime, my other dog (a chocolate Lab named Dana) was feeling a little lonely, and I was feeling a little lonely, so I wanted to foster another dog," she says. She wasn't sure she wanted to do the housebreaking and training that would be involved with taking in another Seeing Eye pup. She called a Schuylkill County animal rescue group, but it didn't offer foster programs. Then a friend posted a bit about Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet on Facebook, the Internet social networking site. The friend suggested the Pilston's look into the program. "So I went online one night and filled out an application, and the next day I get a phone call from Sally (White) from Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet, telling me about John and Diesel," Pilston says. "I just felt like we were supposed to have this dog." Diesel and Dana "hit it off really well," Pilston says. Donato provided instructions, dog food and treats. White also provided a list of instructions routine for Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet foster families. The couple was recently cited in Blue Mountain Animal Clinic's newsletter for their volunteer service. Diesel's picture was included in the salute. The couple has always kept Labs, and the "Seeing Eye dogs were all Labs," she says. "I love Labs. And doing something for the soldiers ... they sacrificed so much, it's the least I can do to help them." When Donato heals and can once again care for Diesel, Pilston says, "We'll probably be looking to do it again."