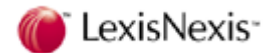




A DOGGONE DEAL FOR SOLDIERS; Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet finds loving foster homes for animals while military personnel are on deployment.

Lara Pabst, Staff Writer
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Derek Brown's golden retriever puppies Buddy and Scout are brothers, and he couldn't bear to split them up when he left Duluth for six months for a National Guard security deployment on the U.S. border with Mexico. Like many Minnesotans who face military deployment, Brown wanted his pets to be waiting for him when he returned, but he didn't want to burden his family with their care. He couldn't afford a kennel, either.

"For military people, that can be a big burden financially," said Brown, a senior airman with the Air Force National Guard's 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth. "With a kennel, you just never know what kind of care you're going to get."

After looking online for someone who could help the dogs, Brown's girlfriend stumbled upon Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet, a national organization that finds foster homes for animals whose owners have been deployed in military service.

Brown had no idea that the foster family who volunteered to take in his dogs would stay in his life even after he returned from his deployment in February.

Lynda Ludwig, of Chaska, cared for the nearly identical 18-month-old dogs. Originally, she had to put a black collar on Buddy and a red one on Scout to tell them apart. Now she's close enough to them that they feel like her own, she said.

Since Brown returned from his deployment in Arizona, he brings his dogs to visit Ludwig. She is even dog-sitting while he goes on vacation.

"The pets are a part of home," Ludwig said. "It's so important to have them there waiting for you."

Sally White, of Burnsville, started the Minnesota chapter last June because she knew there were people out there like her who wanted to support troops "beyond a yellow ribbon bumper sticker." With a son in the Marines and a background in animal rescue, she knew this was a service that was lacking in Minnesota.

"So many of our military have to give up their pets," she said. "There are no alternatives."

The chapter looks for people in the region who are willing to take care of a pet for an extended period of time. Veterinary care, food and supplies are typically worked out between the soldier and the foster family, White said.

"There's a support network for service people from the foster families," she said. "We're asking these people to take on the pets as their own."

White said the group looks for foster families that are "willing to help, able to handle pets and committed." They can find homes for most pets, including dogs, cats, birds, reptiles and horses.

Brown said this type of organization was especially needed in Minnesota, where there isn't a full-time, active-duty base. He said that finding a home for pets can get lost in the shuffle of preparing for deployment.

"When Guard people are called, it's very last minute," he said. "You're not connected to all the support groups."

After Brown returned from his deployment, his dogs were waiting for him.

"For people who have pets, they're a big part of your life to begin with," Brown said. "It helps stabilize everything when you get back."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet , visit www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org or call 952-894-9264.

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