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Guardian Angels safeguard Soldiers' pets

by *Jerrie Macintire, Courier staff*

Brady is a happy, active Black Labrador puppy who probably misses his "daddy," but is enjoying life with his foster family while his Soldier serves our country overseas.

Brady is one lucky dog reaping the benefits of the Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pets program which provides temporary homes for animals affected by deployment.

As Soldiers prepare to support missions abroad, some are left with the dilemma of what to do with a beloved pet while they are away, said Marge Janiak, Tennessee state director for GASP who is also serving as foster mom to Brady.

"This is a different way of supporting the troops," Janiak said. "It's easy to give money, but this is something you have to take from your heart and give."

Janiak's involvement with the program began with her desire to pay tribute to her father, a proud Marine all his life, combined with her love of animals.

"I wanted to do more to support the troops," Janiak explained, so she spends her time speaking about the program and matching requests from Soldiers with homes offered by appropriate foster families. Janiak, who is scheduled to speak at the Sept. 24 pre-deployment/re-deployment fair at Fort Campbell, said her efforts to match pets with foster homes have so far been successful.

"Whenever I need a family, it has worked magically for me," she said.



Courtesy Photo Brady, a black Lab puppy, (foreground) is enjoying his stay with foster brother Clancey, a 5-year old Great Dane who belongs to Marge Janiak. Brady is living with his foster family while his owner serves a tour of duty overseas.

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Recently Janiak received a request from a Soldier in Knoxville, not the usual location for those needing help. Shortly afterward, a family in Cookeville, about 100 miles down the interstate, contacted Janiak and wanted to help a Soldier by fostering a pet.

"I may be able to match them up," she said.

Currently, there are nine pets being fostered in Tennessee, and Janiak is seeking more homes willing to take in a Soldier's pet temporarily.

For the Soldiers serving their country, there is a sense of relief knowing a beloved animal will be cared for during an absence, said Spc. Mandy Hollis, a member of the Army Reserve serving at Fort Campbell.

"It takes a lot of stress off you," said Hollis who was worried about keeping her dog, Chaz, in a home environment while she was away.

"The program is very helpful. It's nice to know there is an organization that helps Soldiers and their pets," she said.

As part of the fostering process, GASP members interview potential foster home owners in order to make a good match and provide a safe, loving environment until the Soldier returns.

Although Janiak loves Brady, she understands her time with him is limited. "I'm attached to him knowing he will go home to daddy. I appreciate him," she said.

There is a written agreement with the owner and the foster home to make sure everyone understands the obligations, according to the official Web site, www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org.

There are several ways interested individuals can support the program, according to Linda Spurlin-Dominik, national president:

- Become a guardian angel for a Soldier's pet
- Form an affiliated chapter in your area
- Consider becoming a foster home coordinator to spread the work, recruit and interview potential foster homes
- Spread the word about what the organization does
- Make a monetary donation, which are deductible as allowed

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The national organization is in the process of establishing a Military and Veterans Pet Sanctuary to ensure a safe, loving environment when a local foster home is not available.

The first MVP Sanctuary will be in Arkansas, and will become a model for future MVP Sanctuaries in states where the program is needed, according to Spurlin-Dominik.

For more on the program, log onto the Web site or e-mail info@guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org.

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