

Vets for Vets: Offering Home, Hope and a Helping Hand

By Kelly Chandler
 Staff Reporter

Jake Leone knows his time in Iraq in 2004 was difficult, although you won't hear him say as much. His unit had a "couple of rough patches," including the loss of his close friend, US Army Spec. Tomas Garces, who was killed in an IED explosion.

But what Leone didn't know, coming home, was how difficult getting back to civilian life would be.

"The first year back was rough for me. When you live in the desert in a Humvee for six months, it's an adjustment," Leone, now a sergeant in the US Army National Guard, Bravo Company, 1-111 Infantry Brigade of West Chester, said. "You have challenges with sleep patterns and other things...I had trouble and I made some bad decisions. Thankfully, I had friends

to help me and I came out on top."

"I was there when he came home and saw what he went through," family friend Chris Haney said of Leone's experience, including a diagnosis of PTSD. "They get off base and they're just sent out. The government, the VA (Office of Veterans Affairs), is there to support them and do what they can, but civilians should be out there doing their part, too."

Leone's desire to help other vets avoid the pitfalls of drinking, drugs and, ultimately suicide, led him and Haney to found Vets for Vets, a non-profit organization based in Pennsburg that supports returning U.S. veterans during their adjustment from military to civilian life.

The pair purchased the former Pennsburg Post Office on Fourth Street and have been intensively

renovating the site to turn it into a safe and positive home for vets that combines camaraderie and the development of life skills, educational and employment opportunities.

One step inside the Pennsburg house and visitors can see the transformation taking place. Light pastel walls, wainscoting and the beginnings of a large wall aquarium are taking shape in the dining/living area, and flooring and trim are being installed throughout. New countertops and a sink have been added in the kitchen, where a breakfast bar will be located. The upstairs apartments are next to be renovated.

The organization has seen a lot of assistance from the community, including donations and drastically reduced pricing from businesses like Roslyn Supply, Valley Lock and Door, Esten Lumber, J & S Carpet, Shermer Electric, Tiletown, Sherwin Williams and Mike Schmoyer

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Bob Esposito / Town and Country

Chris Haney and Jake Leone of Vets for Vets are busy cutting trim as part of renovations to the Pennsburg building.



Chris Haney and Jake Leone, co-founders of Vets for Vets, a non-profit organization based in Pennsburg, has purchased the former Pennsburg Post Office building and is transforming it into a place that returning veterans can call home.



Leone and Haney position an aquarium into a wall in the dining/living room of the facility, which was once the lobby of the post office. The group, with the help of volunteers, hopes to have the renovations completed by August of this year.

Mensch Appointed Chairman of Legislative Budget and Finance Committee

State Sen. Bob Mensch (R-24) has been tapped to chair a bipartisan legislative panel created to identify and eliminate unnecessary government spending.

The Legislative Budget and Finance Committee is made up of six senators and six representatives and is authorized to conduct a wide range of research evaluating the operation and performance of state-funded programs and agencies. Mensch previously served as a member of the committee.

The committee appoints an executive director responsible for the direction of the committee staff and activities. Recent LBFC reports include "Impact of Slots Gaming on the Pennsylvania State Lottery," "Pennsylvania's Continuing Education Program for Professional Educators" and "Museum Funding in Pennsylvania."

"There have been few times in the 54-year history of the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee when the need to eliminate unnecessary spending has been greater," Mensch said. "The bipartisan

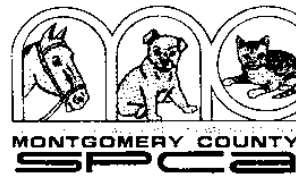
research conducted at the direction LBFC will help identify what's working in state government and what's not, with the goal of protecting taxpayers and stretching limited resources to meet essential needs in difficult times."

Mensch also chairs the Senate Aging and Youth Committee, and is vice chairman of the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee. He is a member of the Appropriations Committee, the Communications and Technology Committee, the Intergovernmental Operations Committee and the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. He co-chairs the Senate Economy, Business and Jobs Caucus and is a member of the Pennsylvania Alzheimer's Disease Planning Committee.

More information about state issues is available at Mensch's website, www.SenatorMensch.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/senatormensch.

Pets of the Week

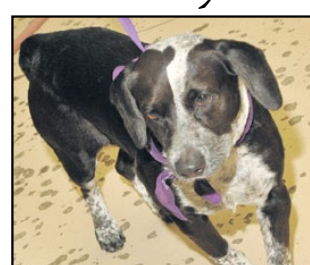
These Pets of the Week and other equally adorable pets can be adopted at the Montgomery County SPCA, Little and Sweifford roads, Perkiomenville. For directions or details, call (610) 754-7822.



Penny



Chachi



Poin Dexter



Lucy

The Montgomery County SPCA shelter near Perkiomenville has two dogs and two cats featured as **Pets of the Week**:

At the top left is **Penny**, an adult neutered male Lynx Point Domestic Long Hair. He is litterbox trained and is good with children, dogs and other cats. **(Release #233428)**

At the top right is **Chachi**, a young adult neutered male black-and-white Domestic Short Hair. He is litterbox trained and good with children, dogs and other cats. Chachi is front declawed. **(Release #A233105)**

At the bottom left is **Poin Dexter**, a 4-year-old spayed female black and white Beagle/Australian Cattle Dog mix. She is housebroken, good with children, cats and other dogs. **(Release #234388)**

And in the bottom right is **Lucy**, a 3-year-old spayed female Irish Wolfhound mix. She is good with children, crate trained and likes car rides. She has never been around other animals. **(Release #234285)**



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of Senior Safety Net.

"The support from this community has really been amazing," Leone noted, adding the group is also partnering with area VFW Posts, like 5954 in Red Hill, and American Legions, like Post 184 in Palm. "It has really taken off, and their support for veterans is second to none."

A team from Home Depot is also slated to assist with exterior renovations in late July.

Once complete, Vets for Vets will welcome its first tenants. Leone said each candidate will go through an interview process and the organization will find out that person's goals and establish actions to help him or her successfully meet those goals, whether it be through job training or education. The objective is to house each person for approximately one year, but each case will be evaluated on a one-on-one basis.

Part of Leone's focus is to avoid the cycle of vets relying on prescription medication or self-medicating.

"Military experience changes you for the rest of your life. I think it's something everyone should have to do. But from my experience being deployed, the connecting with family and friends on a real level at home is really challenging," he said.

"We've met so many people who, for one reason or another, come home to less than optimal circumstances, too," Leone explained. "We know one guy whose mom drained his bank account. Some guys are living in an armory. We met a guy this weekend in Reading who's living at the Y[MCA]. We want to help these guys realize their full potential, their worth."

"Vets are undervalued as a whole. Military personnel hold themselves to a different standard. We want to take those personal attributes and translate them into skills. We're not looking to spoon feed them, we want to help them make it on their own."

The house will be run with military-like structure, including eating breakfast and dinner together, and logging hours of required community service, which will help the vets function at their best.

A component to "helping vets help themselves," the organization's slogan, is a senior outreach program that will have them volunteer for older veterans and their families to perform light household repairs and construction.

Other elements of the program are still in the works. "We have a million ideas. We just put our heads down and keep moving forward," Leone said with a laugh.

All the time and effort he and Haney are putting into the organization, aside from their jobs in the private sector, proves Vets for Vets really is a labor of love for them.

"I have a tremendous level of pride," Leone said. "I know it's going to work. This organization isn't large enough to fix everyone, but Chris and I are dedicated to make a difference in the guys here. This is where it's all going to come together."

Vets for Vets is active in the region's veterans events and will be raising funds for USMC Lance Cpl. Mark Fidler, who was seriously injured in military service, at the Third Annual Motorcyclists Appreciation Day June 15 from noon until 6 p.m. at Zern's Farmers Market in Gilbertsville. The group is also soliciting donations of canned goods, socks and pup tents for a veteran's event in Allentown Aug. 3. Donations may be dropped off at the Fourth Street, Pennsburg house.

For more information on Vets for Vets, visit their website, www.soldiertocivilian.org, their Facebook page, or call 484-938-VETS.

Amanda Geiger never saw the drunk driver.

Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk.



Photo by Jeff Heston

U.S. Department of Transportation

