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Program finds families for veterans

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Ronald Moulton has a screaming eagle on his forearm and an I've-see-it-all expression on his face. He's perched awkwardly on the edge of a flower-print couch, across from a table stacked with grandmotherly knick-knacks. He's a dagger in a vase of roses. Just so out of place. And yet - - somehow -- this arrangement seems to be working.

The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs is trying a new approach for those, like Moulton, who cannot live on their own: It's pairing them up with community caregivers willing to take disabled veterans into their homes and provide 24-hour supervision and personal assistance. That's how the gruff, tattooed Moulton has come to live with 87-year-old Donna Nielson.

Moulton is only 61, but it's been years since he was able to live by himself. Estranged from his family and suffering the psychological symptoms of war - --- including depression, anxiety, alcoholism and drug abuse -- the only place for him, up until recently, has been in nursing homes.

Nielson's husband, a Navy veteran who served during World War II, passed away last year. He'd been sick for a while, so she'd grown used to taking care of someone. And, she says, after 62 years of marriage, her West Valley City home just seemed so lonely.

That changed last month, when Nielson cleared the requisite background checks, interviews and classes necessary to bring up to two disabled veterans into her home. She'll be paid from \$1,500 to \$2,500 a month per tenant to monitor their medications, provide transportation to medical appointments, and fix up three squares a day.

It's an arrangement that's part business, part friendship. And, increasingly over the past few weeks for this odd couple, it's beginning to feel like something more. The grizzled vet even joined Nielson for Thanksgiving dinner at her son's home -- the first family Thanksgiving Moulton has had since his mother died, more than a decade ago.

"Did you have any of the candied yams?" Nielson asks, recalling the big meal over a considerably smaller dinner of salad and turkey soup, made from the leftovers.

"No, I didn't have any of those," Moulton answers, not taking his eyes off his soup.

"But I made those yams!" she objects.

"I know," he responds, looking up from his bowl to meet her gaze with a sly grin. "That's why I didn't have any of them!"

Nielson wags her spoon at her new friend, and they laugh together like old friends.

Twelve hundred miles away, in Little Rock, Ark., Tom McClure is wearing a content grin. The veteran social worker conceived of the idea of placing ailing veterans in family homes in 1987. After playing unofficial matchmaker to veterans and caregivers for more than a decade, McClure was given a grant to start an official pilot program.

He'd made more than 20 placements by 2002, when a skeptical Thomas Edes, director of home and community-based care for the V.A., arrived to look into the program.

"I was excited, but at the same time terrified," Edes said, saying he was worried that vulnerable veterans would be placed in the homes of people more interested in collecting a check than providing adequate care.

Edes and McClure made unannounced visits to more than 20 homes in and around Little Rock. At one home, Edes saw a photo on the mantle of the veteran and the caregiver's grandchildren.

"This sure doesn't look like Little Rock," Edes recalls saying.

"No," the caregiver responded, "That's Disney World. We take him everywhere we go."

Edes has since become one of the program's biggest champions -- and has helped secure funding for hundreds of placements and dozens of similar efforts, including the burgeoning program in Utah in which Moulton and Nielson are among the first participants.

McClure said that while problems do occur -- most often, he said, veterans and their caregivers simply do not develop the chemistry needed to live together -- the vast majority of placements are successful and last for many years.

"The veterans become part of the family," he said. "In some cases, when they pass away, they're buried in the foster family's cemetery plot. That's how close they become."

Social worker Josh Brown said the Salt Lake-based program, which he oversees, has only placed two veterans so far. A handful more applicants are having their homes and lives studied for appropriate matches.

But Brown can't contain his excitement about the program's potential. He enthusiastically notes that only two veterans can be placed in any one home -- a stipulation that organizers hope will maintain a family, rather than institutional, atmosphere.

But Brown also acknowledges that rule means finding appropriate homes is challenging.

"Who on God's green Earth would take someone into their home who is in need of this kind of service?" Brown said. "What we're looking for is someone who is altruistic, someone who thinks they can provide care and service to someone who paid a price for our freedoms."

Back in Nielson's West Valley home, Moulton has finished his soup and reaches forward to gather his plate.

"Don't you dare get up," Nielson says. "I'm not done yet. You know that you have to sit with me until I'm done."

Moulton blushes, slightly, and sits down.

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

In that moment, the relationship hardly looks businesslike.

It looks like family.

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