

BULLETIN BOARD

TONIGHT

FISH DINNER, 4 to 7 p.m., Slippery Rock Volunteer Fire Company, 162 Elm St., Slippery Rock. Delivery available. Call 724-794-3817 or 724-794-3482.

FISH DINNER, 4 p.m. until supplies run out, South Butler Fire Hall, 98 Old Plank Road. Carryout available.

FISH DINNER, 4:30 p.m., Valencia United Methodist Church fellowship hall, 4:30 to 7 p.m., 66 Almira St. Takeout available. Call 724-625-2330.

FREE COMMUNITY MEAL, 5 to 6 p.m., First United Methodist Church, 200 E. North St., Butler.

SATURDAY

PUBLIC CARD PARTY, 7:30 p.m., Jefferson Grange, Bull Creek Road, Jefferson Township.

MONDAY

FREE HOT MEAL, 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Salvation Army Open Door Feeding Program, 313 W. Cunningham St., Butler.

BUTTERCUP GARDEN CLUB meeting, noon. Field trip to the spring flower show at Phipps Conservatory.

FREE COMMUNITY MEAL, 5 to 6 p.m. at First English Lutheran Church, 241 N. Main St., Butler. Hosted jointly with Grace Lutheran, Jefferson Center Presbyterian and Christ Community Methodist churches.

TAKE OFF POUNDS SENSIBLY meeting, 5:30 p.m. following weigh-in at 5 p.m. Trinity Lutheran Church, 120 Sunset Drive. For information, call Denise at 724-445-7422 or Josi at 724-282-4059.

GFWC WOMAN'S CLUB OF BUTLER meeting, 1:30 p.m., YWCA, Butler.

FLOWER DANCE meditation group meeting, 6 to 7 p.m. at a member home. Non-denominational. Instruction available. Call Celia at 724-282-1093.

CIVIL AIR PATROL Composite Squadron 712 meeting, 7 to 9 p.m., Butler County Airport Hangar C-1, 473 Airport Road, Penn Township. For information, go to www.gocivilairpatrol.com or www.CAPButler.org or contact Capt. Kevin Berry, CC712BTP@zoominternet.net or 724-586-1182.

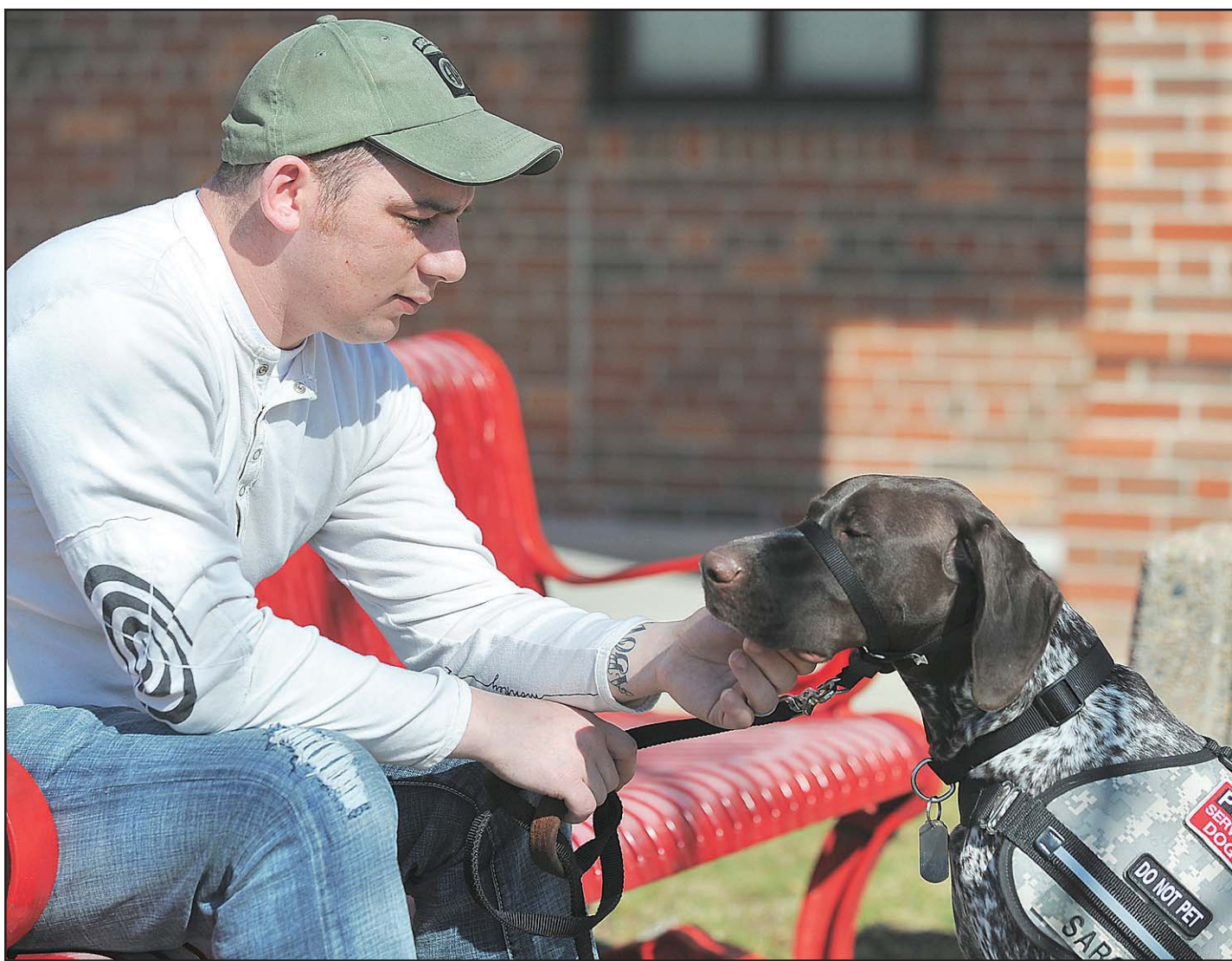
AL-ANON meeting, 8 p.m., Mt. Chestnut Presbyterian Church, 727 W. Old 422, Butler. Newcomers come at 7:30 p.m.

Notices of local club meetings, card parties and dinners should be received by the Focus Department one week in advance of the event. Entries should include the name and phone number of the person providing the information and be sent to: Focus, Butler Eagle, P.O. Box 271, Butler, PA 16003, or focus@butlereagle.com.

Color Comics brighten your weekend in the Eagle's Sunday edition

David Stemmerich, 28, a retired Army staff sergeant who served two tours of duty in Iraq, pets Sarge, his faithful German shorthaired pointer, March 17 at the VA Butler Healthcare. Sarge completed formal obedience training early in March with Freedom Guide Dogs to help Stemmerich cope with anxiety and reduce his isolation. Sarge is the second dog trained by the organization to serve a veteran and the first family pet to do so.

DAVE PRELOSKY/
BUTLER EAGLE



At Ease Men

Service dog is blessing for veteran

By **CAITLIN BAUER**
Eagle Staff Writer

David Stemmerich's dog Sarge is more than a faithful companion: He's a lifeline.

After an appointment last week at VA Butler Healthcare, Stemmerich walked down the bustling hallway with his hand loosely wrapped around Sarge's black nylon leash.

Ignoring all distractions, Sarge stayed close by with his gentle amber-colored eyes keeping watch over his master.

"Take a break," Stemmerich said as they approached the elevator. Sarge rested patiently at his feet, looking up for the next command.

"He's like one of my soldiers," Stemmerich said, running his hand over Sarge's glossy fur. "I helped train him, I put a lot of work into him and now it's paying off."

Sarge completed formal obedience training early in March with Freedom Guide Dogs to help Stemmerich cope with anxiety and reduce his isolation.

The retired Army staff sergeant, 28, completed two tours of duty in Iraq and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sarge was the second dog trained by the organization to serve a veteran and the first family pet to do so.

"I think it's life-changing," Stemmerich said. "I've been a lot of places this week that I haven't been to in a long time."

Stemmerich served in Iraq from March 2003 to August 2005, with a four-month break between tours in South Korea.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that can occur after experiencing a traumatic or life-threatening event, such as combat or military exposure. Symptoms include flashbacks, feeling numb or keyed up and avoiding situations that remind the person of the event, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Stemmerich and his wife Stephanie adopted Sarge, now 10 months old, in July.

The family knew there was something special about the dog when Sarge began waking Stemmerich up from nightmares, jumping on the

'Normally, you would place a dog with a person and hope that bond would be created. With David and Sarge, it was already there.'

STEPHANIE STEMMERICH

bed and licking his face until he woke up.

"That was our first real sign that we should look into this," said Stephanie, 27.

Now, the handsome German shorthaired pointer is Stemmerich's constant companion. In the community, Sarge is clearly at work, wearing a camouflage vest emblazoned with patches that distinguish him as a PTSD service dog.

Service dogs are not uncommon for patients like Stemmerich, but their case is unique because Sarge was already their family pet, Stephanie Stemmerich said.

Most agencies breed and train their own dogs before placing them with a client, she added.

"Normally, you would place a dog with a person and hope that bond would be created," she said. "With David and Sarge, it was already there."

Stemmerich took Sarge to Misty Pines in Sewickley for a few months' worth of obedience classes before the trainer told him about Free-

dom Guide Dogs.

Founded in 1992, Freedom Guide Dogs has about 160 clients in the northeastern and southeastern United States.

The Cassville, N.Y., organization has focused on training guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired but hopes to expand its repertoire to serve veterans, said Nicole White, director of development.

"We have seen an increased need, specifically with veterans, so we're trying to do more to accommodate that," she said.

The Stemmerichs completed an application and provided physician's references as required for all clients, and the staff was moved by the family's story, White said.

Although there are no set requirements for a case like theirs, the decision to take

on Sarge was easy since he was already well-trained and socialized, White said.

The organization picked up Sarge, transported him to the New York facility for training and returned him to the Stemmerichs' home in Parker at no cost.

The training was not as extensive as a Seeing Eye dog's, said Sharon Loori, Freedom Guide Dogs co-founder and trainer.

"He's a post-traumatic stress dog; he's not had the guide dog training," Loori said. "What he does is give moral support to his handler so that he can be out in the community."

Loori and her husband Eric helped socialize Sarge by taking him to public places and teaching him to react calmly and obey every command.

"It helps them to adapt, so instead of being worried or confused, the dog is able to maneuver different situa-

tions," White said.

It sounds simple, but the training greatly benefits both the dog and their owner by reducing anxiety, White said.

Stemmerich often feels uncomfortable in public places, especially crowded areas, but Sarge helps put him at ease, Stephanie Stemmerich said.

"Instead of focusing on the crowds and the stress of being in public, he's focused on Sarge," she said.

At home, he's a lovable family pet and behaves perfectly around their 3-year-old daughter, Adiah, Stephanie Stemmerich said.

Stemmerich's situation might not be obvious to the casual observer, but the need is there, White said.

"Sarge is there as a security for him and gives him the independence that he otherwise wouldn't have," White said. "Although that's something you can't see, it's truly a priceless gift."

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Butler Eagle

He has risen.
He has risen indeed!
Alleluia!

A Blessed Easter from
our family to yours.

Concordia Lutheran Ministries is a CARF-CCAC accredited Aging Services Network.

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