

A rebuilt body, a fragile spirit

As doctors painstakingly reconstruct 10-year-old Nick Foley, his frightened McHenry County community splits apart

By Carolyn Starks and John Keilman
Tribune staff reporters

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Dr. Grant Geissler left his Lincolnshire home in a blur the evening of Nov. 5, scarcely saying a word to his dinner guests. A hard rain splattered on his windshield as he raced toward Park Ridge in the fast lane of the Tri-State Tollway, flashing his high beams at anyone who got in his way.

Geissler, a pediatric trauma surgeon, was accustomed to treating some of life's worst injuries--a child run over by a lawnmower, a girl impaled by a signpost. Like most of his colleagues, he'd also seen his share of dog bites. In a country where almost 5 million people are bitten each year, the wounds are an inevitable part of his job.

But even he was shaken by the urgent call he had just received from another surgeon: Three pit bulls that had always seemed friendly had gone on a rampage, attacking their owner, two children and several other people. They had mauled a 10-year-old boy so badly that he might not make it.

It was enough to make Geissler shudder. He had three kids at home, along with two golden retrievers. He couldn't imagine pets turning on a child with such violence.

He reached Advocate Lutheran General Hospital at 7 p.m., darting past the hulking main desk of the emergency room on his way to a Level One trauma room. The sliding glass doors opened with a swoosh.

On a gurney before him lay Nick Foley.

The boy was immobilized on a backboard, wrapped head to toe in layers of thick, wet bandages. Nick's injuries were so severe that his body was weeping fluids like a burn victim's.

"Nick," Geissler said softly. "We're going to clean you up while you sleep. I know people have been poking at you, but I'm going to examine you and have a little look around. Are you in any pain?"

Nick opened his eyes.

"No, sir. They gave me a pain shot."

Remarkably, no major arteries or organs had been injured, and Nick's airway was clear. He was alive, Geissler surmised, because he had kept his arms up. If the dogs had gotten to his neck, they would have killed him.

The surgeon unraveled a bandage on Nick's forearm and winced. Most of the muscle had been torn away, exposing bone etched with teeth marks. Tendons and veins hung loose.

The massive damage was the signature of a pit bull. Built like bricks of muscle, they are among the strongest dogs in the world, and for generations they were bred to kill. They don't nip and recoil like other dogs. They sink their teeth deep into tissue, grinding and tearing.

But Geissler had never seen any dog shred a person like this. It looked like the work of a shark.

"We need to go--now," he said, leading the trauma team toward the operating room.

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Polly Foley was slumped beside the ER desk. She had warned the nurses that she was prone to passing out at the sight of blood, and they had scrambled to find her a chair.

It had taken her almost three hours to get to Lutheran General from her neighborhood near Cary. In the chaotic aftermath of the attack, an ambulance driver mistakenly directed her to the wrong hospital.

A rosary dangled from her fingers. Polly had grown up in a traditional Catholic family, and prayer came as naturally to her as a conversation with a friend. She had never needed it more.

God, I don't know why You grant some miracles, but I humbly ask You to save my son.

A line of solemn doctors appeared before her with permission forms for Nick's surgery, including warnings of possible death. She signed robotically, hardly glancing at the papers.

Geissler was the last to approach. He had a palpable compassion for his young patients and an air of confidence that seldom failed to reassure parents. He calmly described what would happen next, then made a promise:

"I have a [boy named] Nicky at home and I won't let anything happen to your Nicholas tonight."

The team wheeled Nick into a large room usually reserved for heart patients. As nurses and surgeons jostled each other beside the operating table, a tall priest in scrubs reached in to touch Nick's forehead and palms with holy oil.

Rev. Stephen Folorunso, the Foleys' priest, had come at the hospital's call to perform the anointing of the sick, a Catholic sacrament offered to the gravely ill and the dying. When he turned over Nick's hand to make a small cross in his palm, he saw that the flesh had been chewed away from the boy's forearm.

Steeling himself, he carried on.

"Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you," he prayed, quickly marking Nick's palms and forehead before slipping out.

The trauma team's first step was to clean Nick's muddy wounds and flood his body with antibiotics to prevent a deadly infection. Soil-borne clostridia bacteria could cause gangrene and kill the boy within as little as 12 hours.

Seven surgeons worked on Nick. While some held up his arms and legs, others used jet irrigators--high-powered water guns--to blast out embedded mud, grass, leaves, dog hair and bits of clothing.

They used scissors and scalpels to cut away dead skin and muscle, giving the wounds the clean edges they would need to heal. They tied up veins and sewed shut roughly 100 bites on Nick's legs, arms, torso and head.

A plastic surgeon, Dr. Loren Schechter, laced 35 stitches into Nick's face, closing his torn cheek into two arcs crossing near the chin. The larger wounds were so extreme that they would need a second day of cleaning and tissue removal.

The pit bulls also had broken both of Nick's forearms. Stripped of flesh, the limbs could not hold a cast, so orthopedic surgeon Dr. George Firlit set them with fixators--metal bars mounted outside Nick's arms and screwed into his bones with pins.

The surgeons worked for five hours to stabilize Nick. They finished well after midnight.

When Geissler left, it seemed likely that Nick's wounds wouldn't be fatal. Infection, though, remained a major worry. It would take another nervous week of monitoring before that threat passed.

The surgeon drove home in darkness, exhausted. The next day, when he saw his children, he told them they were never, ever, to go near a pit bull.

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Five days after the attack, as doctors allowed the sedation to wear off, Nick awoke slowly, mumbling at first. He started to talk, and even laughed at a nurse's joke.

But then, without warning, he screamed that the dogs were swarming him. He could hear them breathing, smacking their jaws.

"I can feel them on me, Mommy!" he cried. "I can feel them on me!"

"The dogs are dead. They killed the dogs," Polly said over and over. "You're in the hospital. You're safe now."

Nick was heavily wrapped in bandages. The craters in his arms and legs were packed with pressurized foam dressings. An attached tube allowed infectious fluids to drain.

Schechter, the plastic surgeon, began grafting healthy skin over those hollows. The surgeon shaved thin, almost translucent 8-by-4-inch patches of skin from Nick's lower back and upper thighs, leaving behind a painful red checkerboard.

Rollers pressed each patch into a lattice, helping the skin to stretch even more. Schechter laid the grafts atop Nick's wounds and sealed them with a bandage.

The feeding tubes had been removed, so Nick could sip juice and eat soft food, but his expression remained blank from drugs and trauma.

He had been the kind of kid who would spend a soccer game jabbering with opposing players instead of competing against them. Now he barely said a word.

"I have to keep telling myself that it won't stay this way," Polly wrote in an online diary two weeks after the

attack. "Now it's like he's awake but he's a shell of who he was. I want to see my Nick again."

The long days at the hospital drained her. She resigned as a high school chemistry instructor--her first teaching job--to be with Nick full-time.

Her husband, Brooks, took a leave from his software engineering company to care for Nick, but he was suffering too. He had been searching for Nick when the dogs had attacked him, and though he glimpsed a small body on a nearby lawn, he hadn't been sure it was his son. Injured, he went for help.

But later that night, just before Brooks entered surgery for his maimed right arm at Northern Illinois Medical Center in McHenry, Polly told him the dogs had also gotten Nick, hurting him badly.

Doped up, trying to catch a breath through an oxygen mask, all Brooks could do was cry.

By the next day Brooks was released, his arm sheathed in bandages. Soon he was camped out by Nick's bedside, calming his son during terrifying, drug-induced hallucinations. He passed quieter hours reading stories and Scriptures aloud.

Once he read the parable of Jesus feeding a crowd with a few loaves and fishes. God has given us so much in our suffering, he told Nick. So many people are praying for us. Even strangers are sending gifts and cards.

But as the days went on, Brooks felt he was losing control. It was as if the attack--its smells, sounds, images--were trapped in his mind. And with Nick finally stabilized, he began to be haunted by guilt. His son had been on that lawn. He shouldn't have gone for help; he should have stayed.

Brooks tried to smother his emotional upheaval with action. Within a week of the attack, he joined about a dozen neighbors in the home of Mark Guerra, president of the homeowners association, to push two local politicians for a ban on pit bulls.

The discussion was civil but emotional, especially when Brooks described what had happened that night. But the politicians said a ban was unlikely.

The talk then turned to pit bulls that still lived among them. Down the street was Muddy Jr., a puppy of Good Girl, one of the dogs that had gone berserk. Despite the insistence of some neighbors, the pit bull's owner had not given him up.

The man told Guerra that he was being harassed. Guerra had never heard a complaint about the dog before and thought the neighbors' demands seemed like vigilantism. He implored everyone at the meeting to back off.

"Give him time to get rid of the dog," he said. "We can't freak out on him. He will get rid of the dog. He told me he would."

On Nov. 21, though, one neighbor told McHenry County Animal Control that Muddy Jr. had briefly been outside acting aggressively. When officers stopped by the next day, the owner complained that he was being besieged by the media, that people were leaving nasty notes on his door and that no children would come over to play with his daughter.

He agreed to hand over the pit bull. He wrote on the surrender form that the dog was good with kids, had never bitten anyone and liked "to play and be loved."

Animal Control officials gave Muddy Jr. a chance, putting him through a temperament test meant to gauge his aggression. But when he responded angrily to having his skin pinched and his food bowl moved, his fate was

sealed.

Dr. Edin Mehanovic, a veterinarian who is the county's Animal Control administrator, gave the dog an injection of the sedative ketamine, followed by a shot of a drug called "Fatal Plus."

Within hours of leaving his home, Muddy Jr. was put to sleep.

As his neighborhood roiled, Nick settled into a grinding routine of rehabilitation overseen by occupational therapist Jason Dankert. Normally he worked with adults, but he had bonded with Nick and agreed to continue with him. He was sincere but tough, and Nick liked his pity-free sense of humor.

Once, when Nick's older sister, Maureen, teased him during a visit, Dankert turned it into a motivational ploy.

"Is she bugging you?" Dankert said.

"Yes!"

"Well, get up and hit her!"

Every other day, Dankert and an assistant changed their patient's neck-to-toe bandages. Nick was afraid to look at his wounds, so Dankert started by putting a towel around the boy's head to cover his eyes. He then slowly unraveled the fabric, 60 feet in all.

The bandages were sticky with ointment and pulled at Nick's skin, and while the sensation didn't hurt, it could make him panic--he told his mother it felt like the dogs tugging at him.

Dankert washed the wounds with soap and water, patted them dry, applied new dressings and replaced the bandages. The job took three hours.

Nick's most serious injury was the damage to his right forearm muscles and ulnar nerve, which runs from the shoulder to the fingertips and controls hand movement. Kneeling before Nick's wheelchair one afternoon, Dankert pressed back the fingers on the boy's right hand.

"I can't feel my pinky," Nick said.

His ring finger and pinky, left without sensation, had begun to curl stiffly, and he was unable to grip objects properly. Every day Dankert moved the fingers to build flexibility and prevent atrophy, but it was becoming clear that Nick would need surgery.

Polly tried to keep her son upbeat. Like Dankert, she felt that Nick would not improve if he thought of himself as a victim.

"I hate my legs," Nick spat one day after catching a glimpse of his wounds. "They're ugly."

"Your legs are beautiful," Polly shot back, "because they're there, they work and you're alive."

On the day after Thanksgiving, Nick moved to the pediatrics unit. The ward was home to children with cancer and other grave ailments but it was cheerful nonetheless, a pastel-colored whirlwind of activity.

Room E-222 belonged to Nick. The walls and shelves were festooned with get well cards, posters and drawings,

while bright balloons clustered on the ceiling. Nick began to open up, joking with the nurses and therapists and asking to see his dog, Java. She would be his protector, he thought, keeping him safe from other dogs.

For health reasons, pets weren't allowed to walk the hospital's carpeted hallways, so one day Brooks towed Java to Nick's room in a red wagon. Nick held out a small bone for the dog, but she snubbed the treat to sniff his wheelchair, drawing a laugh from Nick and his family.

Brooks also brought takeout, and for the first time since the attack, the entire family ate dinner together, with Java underfoot, just like at home.

Nick was getting stronger. In a therapy session about three weeks after the attack he was able to stand, with help, for only 30 seconds. The next day he was up for two minutes. A few days later he was taking small steps.

In early December came an important test. Knowing Nick would have to navigate stairs at home, physical therapist Kate Born told him to walk up eight steps in the stairwell--by himself. She stood behind to catch him if he fell, while his mother went to the landing above.

Nick started slowly, clutching the handrail, his face contorted with pain. He'd just received touch-ups to the skin grafts on his legs, and they felt raw. His hamstring muscles, mangled by the dogs, were straining with effort.

Yet he kept climbing, with Born and Polly cheering him on. He stopped after six steps, unable to continue. His mother reached out and with a gentle pull, helped him up the final two.

She kissed him on the forehead, and he collapsed onto her shoulder.

Two weeks later, Nick was discharged. Christmas was a week away, and though Nick moved gingerly, his body as tender as his psyche, going home was the only present he wanted. But he was returning to a neighborhood that had radically changed.

"[The attack] took all the energy out, the fun, everything that made our neighborhood great," said Guerra, the homeowners association president.

The normal social buzz had been replaced by fear. Parents walked their children to playmates' homes and drove them to the elementary school less than a block away.

It was the holiday season. But much of the good cheer was gone.

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How we reported the series

To research this story, Tribune reporter Carolyn Starks interviewed the five members of the Foley family--Brooks and Polly, their son Nick and his brother and sister--as well as friends and neighbors, over nine months starting the day of the attack near Cary on Nov. 5, 2005.

Passages describing the nature of Nick's wounds and initial hospital treatment were based on multiple interviews with doctors and other medical personnel. These sources included Dr. Stephen Rivard, an emergency room physician at Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital; Dr. Grant Geissler, a pediatric trauma surgeon at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital; Dr. Loren Schechter, a plastic surgeon; Dr. Dan Resnick, a trauma surgeon; and Rev. Stephen Folorunso.

Passages describing Nick's experiences in the pediatrics unit were based on multiple interviews with nurses and

with therapists, including Jason Dankert and Kate Born; with Nick and his parents; and through firsthand observations by Starks.

Quotes not heard directly by the reporters were the verbatim recollections of those who made them. Likewise, Polly's prayer, shown in italics, was her verbatim recollection.

Passages describing the impact of the attack on the neighborhood were based on interviews with family members and neighbors. The section describing the decision to destroy a neighbor's dog, Muddy Jr., came from interviews by Starks and reporter John Keilman with Mark Guerra, president of the neighborhood association; documents from the McHenry County Animal Control office; and an interview with Dr. Edin Mehanovic, McHenry County's Animal Control administrator, who provided details on the dog's temperament test.

The dog's owner declined to discuss the incident.

For the passage on the nature of wounds inflicted by pit bulls, Keilman consulted experts, including Alan Beck, director of Purdue University's Center for the Human-Animal Bond; Randall Lockwood and Stephen Zawistowski of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and animal behaviorists, including Peter Borchelt of New York. Keilman also consulted articles and books about pit bulls.

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