

Finding strength to be a kid

As Nick Foley heals, family and neighbors struggle to resume their own lives

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Tribune staff reporters

August 15, 2006

Polly Foley massaged the thick, pebbly skin on the back of her son's legs with lotion, trying to keep scar tissue from fusing to muscle.

The angry red flesh was a powerful reminder of what 10-year-old Nick had survived when a neighbor's three pit bulls turned on him in November. A surgeon told Polly that if the dogs' teeth had reached a main artery behind his knee, Nick could have bled to death within minutes.

"This is when I pray," Polly said, rubbing the skin in gentle circles. "I pray for healing, for thankfulness. I'm thankful because it could have been a lot worse."

After six weeks in the hospital, Nick had come home to his neighborhood near Cary just before Christmas. His parents helped him to walk, eat and shower. Because of injuries to the nerves and muscles in his right forearm, they taught him to write with his left hand.

For an hour every day they worked his scars, barely able to remember how Nick had once looked. The dogs had taken so much muscle from his right forearm that it was little more than a bone covered with skin. Great chunks of tissue were missing from his legs and ankles.

His sensitivity over how he looked brought a dilemma when he got dressed each morning:

Should he go to physical therapy sessions in a T-shirt and gym shorts that would expose his wounds, or hide his body with long sleeves and pants?

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Polly told him, but on many days, long sleeves and pants won out.

Still, being home had boosted Nick's spirits immensely. He was back with Java, the family's playful Labrador retriever, and back in his bedroom decked with sports trophies and memorabilia and an entire shelf of Star Wars action figures.

While Nick regained his good humor, his siblings, Alex, 13, and Maureen, 15, grew resentful. They had grieved as much as their parents after the attack, but with Nick at home, dominating attention, fights broke out regularly.

One night at dinner, the family was talking about Maureen's day at school when Nick turned the conversation to himself.

"When I was in the hospital ..." he began.

"You always have to bring that up," his sister angrily interrupted. "It's always about you."

Polly had sought counseling immediately after the attack, as had her husband, Brooks, who also had been mauled by the dogs. But now they decided the entire family needed help.

Nick had gotten his own taste of psychiatric care in the hospital and had continued with a counselor close to home. They started off easily, playing games and laughing to build trust. Within two months, though, the counselor was probing for the details of the attack, hoping that facing the horror would rob it of its power.

During a session in February, he asked Nick to describe all he could remember of what had happened. He frequently halted the narrative, asking the boy to quantify his fear with a number from 1 to 10.

Sitting outside the office, listening for her son's normal laughter, Polly heard only silence. When Nick emerged, he refused to tell her what he had revealed.

"What's said in there stays in there," he said as they drove away.

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Within a few weeks of coming home, Nick enrolled in a martial arts school for students with disabilities. He arrived for class wearing a uniform so long that his pants swept the floor. He had refused to let his mom pin them up.

The muscles in his legs twitched and his balance was off, but when the instructor called out commands, Nick assumed karate stances with a hard-eyed intensity. Polly was amazed. The old Nick was quick to goof off during sports practices.

"I swear he was never this focused before," she said.

Nick had grown up. He was showing an inner strength his parents hadn't seen before. Though they were proud of the changes, they also mourned the loss of his carefree childhood.

"I wanted to be a baseball player," he said one day, "but I'm not sure my throw's any good anymore."

During the first week of February, Nick returned part-time to Prairie Hill Elementary School. Physical therapy still consumed most of his time, and he was too weak to sit in school for an entire day.

But he was glad to be back. At school, his friends didn't pity him. They thought of him as a hero, and now and then, Nick would lift a sleeve to show off his mangled forearm.

In early March, the local youth basketball league invited him to be the honorary captain for its all-star game. Nick used his hourlong physical therapy sessions to practice shooting and dribbling.

When game day arrived, he struggled all morning with what to wear. He didn't mind showing his arms but didn't

want anyone to see his ankles.

He finally settled on a T-shirt and sweatpants. When he joined his teammates outside the gym, they stripped off their warm-up pants. After a brief hesitation Nick did the same.

"Here," he said, handing his pants to his mother.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm OK."

His buddies stared for a moment, but then the game began. Nick grabbed two rebounds and took one shot. It bounced off the rim, and the entire crowd, it seemed, gave a disappointed groan.

With spring approaching, the warm weather became irresistible. One day, he was shooting baskets in his driveway when he heard children laughing. He grabbed his scooter and raced off to join them on Hawthorne Drive, the street where he had been attacked.

He was nervous--he hadn't been back since that bloody afternoon, and his heart pounded all the way over. But he was also eager to play once more.

Deborah Rivera, who lived on Hawthorne and had witnessed the attack, looked out her picture window and saw Nick hanging out with his friends, his face lit with a huge smile.

"Nick!" she called out. "It's so good to see you."

But Nick hadn't told his mother he was leaving, and she went into a panic when she couldn't find him. When he came home, Polly scolded him, ordering him never to leave the yard again without telling her.

Privately, though, she and her husband rejoiced. Their son had taken another important step. For at least one afternoon, he had conquered his fear.

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There were still setbacks. Nick's most serious injury was the damage to the ulnar nerve in his right arm, which controls muscles in the hand. He'd lost the use of his ring finger and pinky.

In March, Nick met a hand surgeon to determine whether nerve surgery would be successful. The doctor wasn't optimistic and told Nick he might have to live without full use of his right hand.

It was an awful blow. In the shower that evening, Nick sobbed, asking why God had spared him, shouting that he wanted to burn his arm or chop it off.

Nick's father overheard him from the hallway. Brooks had been hurting too. He endured flashbacks that could be triggered by anything from Java's barking to an evening rain. They felt so real that he would throw up his arms to shield himself from phantom dogs.

At times he was driven to a frightening vigilance. Once, in a gloomy twilight that reminded him of that afternoon, he realized Polly wasn't back from a neighbor's house. He grabbed a baseball bat and headed outside.

Meeting her husband in the darkening street, a startled Polly asked: "What are you doing?"

Brooks became consumed with pit bulls, surfing the Internet to compile details of attacks around the country. He peppered local politicians with ideas for controlling the dogs, from requiring muzzles in public to forcing owners to carry \$4 million of liability insurance.

But what haunted him most was a feeling that he had failed his son. On the drizzly day of the attack, Brooks had caught a quick glimpse of two figures on a lawn, and saw the dogs chewing at a familiar pair of sweatpants.

Then the pit bulls turned on him, tearing at his arms and legs. He left the scene telling himself that his son had not been in that yard, that his son was safe. A few hours later he learned he had been wrong.

As the weeks passed, Brooks obsessively replayed the attack in his mind, admitting to himself that he had recognized his son on the lawn. He should have grabbed a baseball bat or a machete or a gun, he thought, and kept fighting until he had killed the dogs.

Brooks grew angry and depressed, reached a tentative acceptance, then started all over again.

He wondered what his own father, the Marine, would have done. The Corps never left a man behind.

At last, he was able to tell his wife what his denial had kept buried: He knew it was Nick.

Now, finally, he could confront his feelings of guilt.

"I did what my son couldn't do. I walked away," Brooks said later, his wife beside him on the living room couch. "To make things worse, I sent [Polly] into it."

His wife faced her own turmoil. Normally practical and levelheaded--the one who kept the family together--she sometimes boiled with frustration.

"I'm just mad, mad, mad at everything today, mad that this happened," she said one afternoon. "I'm sick of always being positive, of having to say to everyone, '[Nick's] making a lot of progress,' when we're not doing well at all."

She grappled with irrational remorse. When the dogs were shredding her son, she was at home, fretting about getting to a restaurant on time. When he was hovering near death in the hospital, she was on the road, headed to the wrong medical center because of miscommunication.

It wasn't her fault. But during the worst hours of her son's life, she hadn't been there. So one evening when Nick was in bed, Polly sat by him and said: "I'm sorry you were alone for so long."

"I know, Mom," he said gently.

Forgiveness was far more difficult when it came to Scott Sword and Cathy Doyle, owners of the pit bulls that attacked Nick and Brooks. The Foleys went to their priest for guidance, but their bitterness still ran deep.

Though Polly knew that Sword had used his massive, 320-pound body to shield Nick from even worse harm, she believed he shouldn't have had the three dogs in the first place.

In March, Sword was fined \$150 for failing to control his dogs. He also pleaded guilty to felony possession of drugs--police had found more than 30 grams of marijuana on his property, though neither he nor the dogs tested positive. He was sentenced to probation and community service.

The Foleys were disgusted at what they considered an exceedingly light fine, especially since they had paid \$800 a month in co-payments for visits to doctors and therapists.

But Sword's punishment went far deeper than what the judge imposed.

The dogs had gnawed his legs and forearms and had almost torn off his right thumb. Sword underwent four operations to repair the damage, and while surgeons reattached his thumb with a wire, his grip was shot, making it hard for him to do the handyman jobs that helped to support his family.

Though he felt his close friends in the neighborhood were behind him--some rented a metal detector and found the gold cap to his front tooth that he lost during the attack--he thought others were coming by to gawk at the site of the bloodshed.

He moved from his house on Hawthorne Drive to a friend's place, leaving behind Doyle and their two children, Max, 11, and Sophie, 7.

Sword knew that Max and Nick, good friends before the attack, had become as distant as strangers. They rarely spoke except for an occasional, awkward greeting in school.

"My world has come to an end," Sword said outside of court in March. "[Nick] was one of my son's best friends, and that's ruined now. I'm just waiting for the right time to talk to [Nick] and say I'm sorry. I just want to give him a big hug."

Like Brooks, Sword wondered incessantly if he could have changed what had happened. What if he had thought to drag Nick behind a bush? What if he had gotten rid of Petey, the attack's prime instigator, when the dog had shown aggression in the months before the assault?

But it was also impossible to forget that until that knock on the door, Petey, Stella and Good Girl had been beloved pets. Long after the dogs were killed by police, Sophie carried a worn-out snapshot of the three in her pocket, while a collage of their photos decorated the family's refrigerator.

"We didn't have much, but those dogs meant everything to us," Sword said.

In March, after Doyle's insurance company asked a judge to limit its liability, Brooks and Polly reluctantly took an attorney's advice and sued Doyle and Sword. The case is pending.

Today, the streets around Nick's home, left desolate by the attack, once more resemble a neighborhood. Children race bikes, zoom about on go-carts and bound on back-yard trampolines.

Jourdan Lamarre has made progress too. The 10-year-old girl spent a week in the hospital after being mauled with Nick while selling candy and wrapping paper. She suffered flashbacks and psychological trauma and refused to leave her house unless she was surrounded by adults.

At the advice of a counselor, she began to sit on her porch alone for a minute at a time. Gradually, she ventured farther from her house for longer periods, sometimes accompanied by Nick, whom she came to see as a guardian.

The two share a survivor's bond, and occasionally talk privately about the attack. Though their friendship has strengthened, it remains happily childlike: On a stifling summer day, the two ran a lemonade stand at the foot of Jourdan's driveway.

Still, there are many reminders that something fundamental has changed. Nobody sees kids selling door-to-door anymore. Formerly easygoing neighbors are quick to call Animal Control whenever a pooch escapes its yard.

Even playtime has its darker moments. One woman recently heard a child blurt out: "Let's play attack dog!"

The pit bull ban some residents wanted never came to pass. The McHenry County Dangerous and Vicious Dog Task Force, formed after the attack, decided instead to seek heavier sanctions against irresponsible dog owners, no matter the breed. Its recommendations have yet to come before the County Board.

Leaving political issues behind, Brooks, Nick and Alex in June took a much-needed chance to get away, heading to South Dakota to scale the Crazy Horse Memorial, a monument carved into the side of a mountain.

Nick fell several times during the 6-mile hike but hoisted himself to his feet, never whining or complaining. Brooks would have been happy if Nick had reached only the halfway point, but after several hours, they made it to the windswept summit and shared a moment of triumph.

But after coming down the mountain, Brooks was waiting with his boys to get into a restaurant when, from the corner of his eye, he saw two dogs approaching.

He recognized at once the muscular bodies, the angular jaws. His chest tightened and he pulled his sons to the other side of the boardwalk.

"There are some dogs coming," he said.

"Are they pit bulls?" Nick asked.

"Yes."

Nick's heart jumped. In an instant he was back on that lawn, the dogs ripping at him. He looked down at his arms and legs, expecting to see blood.

It's OK, he told himself. This isn't going to happen to me again. The dogs are on leashes and aren't going to run at me. I'm OK.

Without a word, he brought himself under control.

Nick, now 11, will start 6th grade in two weeks following a summer of surgery. An operation in June was meant to restore the function in his right hand--whether it was successful won't be known for months--while three plastic surgeries covered his scars with smoother skin.

He came home Saturday from the latest procedure. He'll be having more for years to come.

But he has made progress that few who saw the pit bulls' damage could have imagined. Not long ago, Nick could scarcely hobble up eight steps in a hospital stairwell.

Now he has climbed a mountain.

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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.

Scenes describing Nick's long recovery were based on multiple interviews with those involved, including Nick and his parents, with doctors, nurses and his physical therapists; through firsthand observations by Starks and interviews with officials at Prairie Hill Elementary School in Cary.

Passages on the impact of the attack on Scott Sword, the owner of the three pit bulls, and on his family were based on multiple interviews with Sword and with his lawyer. The material on his guilty plea to felony possession of drugs and on his \$150 fine for failing to control his dogs came from Starks' reporting when Sword was sentenced. Sword's partner Cathy Doyle declined to be interviewed for this story.

The quotes from family members arguing at dinner were based on the verbatim recollection of Polly. Other quotes not heard directly by the reporters were the verbatim recollections of those who made them.

The thoughts of Nick, shown in italics, were his parents' verbatim recollection of what he told them he was thinking.

The passage about Jourdan Lamarre was based on information from the Lamarre's attorney, Martin Dolan.

Information on the attack itself was based on multiple interviews; the 911 tapes from the incident; police reports and through on-the-scene reporting by Starks the night of the incident.

Passages describing the lingering effect on the neighborhood were assembled through repeated interviews with the Foleys and neighbors such as Deborah Rivera and Mark Guerra.

The passage on Nick's session with a counselor was based on his mother's verbatim recollection of what was said.

The passages describing the karate class and basketball game were based on Stark's on-the-scene reporting.

The description and quotes about the vacation trip to South Dakota were based on Brooks' and Polly's verbatim recollection of what happened.

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