

Dog-mauling victim's emotional scars linger

Waukegan considers proposed ordinance fining dog owners who lack insurance

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Sierra Riley looks the other way when she has to walk by the playground near her home. She cleaves to her mother and grips her hand more tightly.

Almost two months after the 8-year-old was mauled by two pit bulls in a Waukegan park, her wounds are healing. It's Sierra's emotional scars that Mindy Riley, 29, a single mom, worries about more.

Riley has attended the last three City Council meetings to ask officials to do something about dangerous dogs. Waukegan officials are mulling a new ordinance that would fine owners if they can't produce proof of insurance to cover dog bites.

The city's conundrum in preventing such attacks is embodied by the Riley household: Since the attack, Sierra is terrified by dogs--except the family's own pit bull, Tinker.

Mindy Riley's dog, which now lives with a friend because her landlord doesn't want it in the apartment, has never acted viciously, she said. Riley doesn't want the city to outlaw specific breeds; she thinks the city should target irresponsible owners.

But the owner of the dogs that mauled Riley's younger daughter said his dogs had never attacked anyone before they encountered Sierra one Sunday in Roosevelt Park.

Several inch-long pink scars line the right side of Sierra's face and another one on her scalp is barely visible through her dark, wavy hair; On her back, bursts of scar tissue, mottled and white, stand out against her light brown skin.

On a recent evening, Sierra was affable to visitors, but when talk turned to the attack, she abruptly withdrew to play with her sister. Asked directly about the day she was mauled, Sierra just nodded and shook her head or murmured an occasional response.

"She just does this to avoid talking about it," Riley said, nodding to her daughters a few yards away, playing patty-cake and occasionally stealing looks at their mother.

Neither Sierra nor Savannah, her 10-year-old sister, likes to remember that day, Oct. 1.

It was a bright afternoon and the sisters headed a few blocks away from their apartment, in the 400 block of Liberty Street, to a playground they had visited almost every day in the summer.

Johnny Climons, 59, of North Chicago, had just come from church and was parked in his truck across the street. He noticed several children playing on the jungle gym, when they were joined by two unleashed, brown dogs. For a few minutes the dogs seemed friendly enough, climbing on the jungle gym with the children, he said.

But then one little girl, scared by the dogs, screamed, started crying and jumped off the side of the slide, he said. It appeared to Climons that the sudden commotion and cries "set the dogs off." One snapped at her back as she curled up in self-protection, while the other bit her head.

"They were handling her like a dishrag," Climons said.

He said he jumped out of this truck, but kept his distance. "I just yelled from the road, 'Get back, get back!'"

The dogs appeared startled and backed off, giving the mother of one of Sierra's playmates time to scoop her off the ground, Climons said.

According to a Waukegan police report, a city animal warden and a police officer arrived and found "two brown pit bulls ... circling and stalking a group of children being held by a woman."

When later cornered at their house, on the 600 block of George Street, the dogs lunged at police, according to the report. One was fatally shot and the other was later put to death.

Their owner, Joseph Hernandez, 35, was charged with misdemeanor reckless conduct and cited with several animal ordinance violations, including letting the dogs run free and failure to prevent bites, according to city authorities.

Meanwhile, at the park, Riley arrived in time to find Sierra in an ambulance.

One eye was badly swollen, Riley said, and skin on Sierra's back was hanging off her body. There was a 3-inch-deep puncture wound in her left side, and gashes across the right side of Sierra's face--the jagged teeth marks of a dog--dripped blood.

The ambulance took Sierra to Vista Medical Center East. The next morning, she had surgery to repair her face. The cuts needed 50 stitches.

Proposal targets all breeds

Waukegan requires owners of known dangerous dogs to carry at least \$300,000 of liability insurance.

But critics like Ald. Sam Cunningham, who represents the south end of Waukegan, say the law is too reactive, only deeming a dog dangerous after it has shown aggression or bitten someone. The dogs in this case would not have fit that description before Sierra's attack.

Cunningham is proposing a law that would allow animal control officers to seize any dog and fine its owner \$500 if the owner can't produce proof of insurance. He said city attorneys plan to have a draft ordinance for consideration in late December or January.

Several Chicago-area suburbs have enacted pit-bull bans or other breed-specific restrictions, but critics say such legislation unfairly targets responsible pit-bull owners and doesn't address other dangerous dogs.

Adam Goldfarb, an expert on dangerous dogs at the Humane Society of the United States, found the idea of requiring insurance for all dogs troubling.

Many insurance companies won't insure certain breeds, he said. Also, most homeowners have liability insurance on their property, but relatively few renters do.

A better approach, Goldfarb said, is to focus more severe penalties on bad owner behavior--failing to neuter, leaving dogs tethered outside for long periods, general neglect or abuse--that makes dogs act aggressively.

Neighbors of Hernandez, the dogs' owner, had called police before because his dogs were chained up outside and barking with a dog across the street, Cunningham said. Under Cunningham's proposal, he said, authorities may have been able to seize the dogs.

But Hernandez said he was not a negligent owner, nor did he view his dogs as dangerous. He said in a phone interview that to his knowledge, his dogs had never bitten anyone before. He got the two dogs about two months before the attacks after a family acquaintance left them at his house.

His two sons, ages 14 and 12, had been pestering him for a dog, so he kept them.

"They were extremely friendly to my kids," he said. "They never showed signs of viciousness. ... These were good dogs."

On Oct. 1, the dogs were in the basement of the George Street address and pried their way through a window with their teeth, Hernandez said.

He only knew something happened when the sound of gunshots outside his home woke him from a nap.

"My deepest apologies to the deepest degree," Hernandez said. "My kids brought this problem upon me, but I'm the adult and I have to take the consequences."

Mom says girl withdrawn

His sympathy is little consolation to Riley. Hernandez had no liability insurance and she hopes her insurance will cover the \$14,000 bill for Sierra's trip to the hospital, overnight stay and surgery. Riley has hired attorneys to look into legal action against Hernandez and the city.

One recent afternoon at the Lake County Boys and Girls Club, Sierra appeared no different from the other children. A pencil waggled in her hand as she did homework, her brow furrowed. Later, she cavorted through the halls with friends.

But to her mother, the change is evident. Sierra, once an "attention queen," now prefers to stay in the background, especially when well-meaning adults eye her scars. She told her godfather, Ike Melendez, 21, she no longer trusted children, because kids didn't help her that day in the park.

Neither sister has seen a counselor. Their mother, who works at a restaurant in Vernon Hills, isn't sure she could afford the sessions. Both Riley and Melendez think it would help her to talk about what happened.

"I wouldn't say she's not getting better," Melendez said. "She is, but it's not coming on as fast as it could be."