

St. Pete dog mauling victim faces long recovery

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TAMPA — The woman who was attacked and critically injured by her dog Thursday afternoon will live but faces a long road to recovery that will include multiple surgeries, her husband said Friday.

Patricia Thiel, 39, sustained several injuries in the attack, the most serious to her arms, which she used to try to protect herself.

Thiel's common-law husband, Robert Jacks, was afraid she might lose her right arm, but doctors were able to save it during emergency surgery late Thursday night, he said. She was slated to for further surgery.

"I think she's out of the woods," said Jacks, 43. "It's a life-changing injury for her."

Yet when Thiel awoke Friday, her first words to her husband were not about her own welfare.

Instead, she asked about the couple's four other dogs. Thiel and Jacks, who have been together for 18 years, don't have children and often rescue dogs who appear in their neighborhood.

"These were our projects. These were our dogs," Jacks said.

After the attack, which occurred shortly after 2 p.m. Thursday in the couple's fenced-in back yard in Lakewood Estates, Pinellas County Animal Services impounded three of the couple's other dogs.

A fourth dog was spooked by the attack and ran away.

The animals will be returned to the couple if investigators conclude they had no part in the attack on Thiel, a cardiac nurse at All Children's Hospital.

Thiel told her husband she was breaking up a scuffle between the dogs when Jake, a Labrador-pit bullterrier mix that the couple had rescued, attacked her.

A neighbor, Joseph Wharton, 48, came to her aid and shot and killed Jake, who weighed about 100 pounds.

"I'm going to thank him when I see him," Jacks said of Wharton.

The couple is unsure why the dog, which had become part of the family and often slept on their bed, would attack.

They rescued Jake four years ago after he strayed onto the grounds of St. Petersburg Country Club, where Jacks works as the golf course superintendent.

The dog had issues, including a fear of people, but the couple had worked to rehabilitate him. They suspect he had been abused.

"When you get a dog like that, you don't know the background," Jacks said. "He was skittish, but never aggressive."

Richard H. Polsky, Ph.D. a certified applied animal behaviorist in Los Angeles, said getting to the root of a dog attack is never simple. "Each case has to be taken individually," said Polsky, who runs www.dogexpert.com. Generally speaking, trying to break up a dog fight may invite injury, Polsky said. He said occasionally dogs may turn their aggression to the person breaking up the fight. "Most people struggle," he said. "That may make a dog more aggressive."

About 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Almost one in five of those require medical attention, and more than 31,000 people in 2006 had reconstruction surgery after a dog bite.

Jacks said his wife could move her fingers Friday, but it was still unclear if there is nerve damage. She will need skin grafts, he said.

"That's what's really bothering me — how much pain she's in," he said.

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