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Slain pit bull dies a hero

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Inside Bay Area

OAKLAND — It was a routine walk for Mike Henrickson and his dogs.

Up and down the hill from King Estates Middle School, where Henrickson, 47, would throw a ball for Benny, his fetch-minded pit bull, while his other dogs played off leash.

Henrickson, a mild-mannered guy who retired as an auto body mechanic six years ago after a stroke, had made that walk every day for 11 years, sometimes after midnight.

Nothing broke their routine until dusk a week ago today, when Benny took a bullet between the shoulder blades while protecting his pack.

As he was returning home from the school with Benny and his other dog, Rosie, by his side, Henrickson was mugged. Someone had run up behind them on Fontaine Street and struck the back of Henrickson's head with a pistol, knocking him to his knees.

"Benny looked at me, listened to my voice, knew I was in trouble and took it from there," Henrickson said. Benny lunged at the gunman, releasing his fury and full 85 pounds at the stranger.

Henrickson pleaded with the gunman not to shoot. Benny was on a retractable leash, which Henrickson released while Rosie, also a pit bull, barked wildly at his side.

"Benny pushed him and bit him and got him as far away from me as he could," Henrickson said.

The dog chased the gunman into the middle of the street, which runs along Interstate 580 near Keller Avenue in East Oakland.

Henrickson said Benny locked his jaws on the arm the gunman used to point his pistol.

The guy grabbed the gun with his free hand and shot Benny "pistol to fur," Henrickson said.

The dog fell, and the gunman fled to a car waiting a few feet up the street.

Henrickson dragged Benny to the sidewalk, where he held his dog while he died.

"He looked in my eye like he was saying, 'Did I do OK, Dad? Did I do good?'" Henrickson said. "I told him, 'You're a good boy, Ben. Don't die.'"

Pit bulls are known for being fiercely loyal to their owners, but dog trainers say any dog might respond the same way.

"Dogs have a way of sensing things that we can't fully explain," said Mike Wombacher, a San Francisco-based dog trainer.

Wombacher said he has had clients with dogs who reacted like Benny when their owners were threatened, as well as dogs that do nothing. So much is based on temperament and training, he said.

Benny was protection-trained. Henrickson had worked with the dog to provoke aggression when attacked, although people who knew the 6-year-old dog said he had never attacked anyone or anything, save a tennis ball or two, in his life.

"He was a big ol' lap dog," said David Ratto, a friend of Henrickson.

He's now a hero to some.

"Benny defended my dad to the end. He gave his life for my dad," Henrickson's

18-year-old daughter, Krista, wrote in a letter to the Tribune.

"My dad is so upset. I am too, but mainly because I almost had lost my dad," she said.

Henrickson and his friends said they wanted to share their story — accounts all verified by Oakland police — because they are tired of hearing only pit bull horror stories in the media.

"There is nothing that can bring Benny back, I know," Krista wrote. "But I can't stop the tears. I held my dad while he cried and he did the same (for me)."

Henrickson and his girlfriend, Amanda Zamacona, found Benny on Halloween morning about five years ago about 30 feet from where he was killed.

He was scared, skinny and full of fleas, the two recalled this week while sitting in Henrickson's kitchen, a marked-up pit bull calendar on the wall and a big-framed photo of Benny that Zamacona made him as a memorial atop a counter.

Benny had crawled under a parked car on the corner to escape police.

"They couldn't coax him out for anything," Henrickson said. He has had dogs, mostly pit bulls, for 27 years.

He said he walked up to the 10-month-old stray and said, "Come on, big boy."

Benny came right out, so Henrickson slipped a rope leash around his neck and told police he'd take it from there.

"He walked just perfect with me all the way to my house," Henrickson said.

"Poor dog," Henrickson said. "He was a real soldier. He gave his life for mine."

Police said it is highly unusual for robbers to mug someone walking with dogs, particularly two big pit bulls. And definitely not very smart.

"If they were smart, they wouldn't be criminals," Sgt. Caesar Basa said.

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