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Dog attacks area woman

By James Downing and Alexandra Perloe
Sentinel & Enterprise

WESTMINSTER -- A bull mastiff attacked a Leominster woman Wednesday afternoon as she tried to protect her 3-year-old grandson on Old Oak Avenue.

Josephine Bilotta, 74, said the incident left her with about 40 stitches on her forearms.

"The poor baby, he was traumatized by this," she said of her grandson in a telephone interview Friday. "Seeing his grandmother being eaten up by a dog. If it was him, he wouldn't be here."

Bilotta said she had been playing with her grandson on the lakefront at her niece's property on Old Oak Avenue, when a large bull mastiff charged toward her young relative.

Bilotta said she picked her grandson up and the dog knocked the pair over. Her grandson went underwater and she plucked him out, she said. The dog knocked them over again and Bilotta threw her body over her grandson's to protect him, she said. That's when the dog started gnawing on her forearms, she said.

A boy who knew the dog came over and wrestled with it to get it off of her, Bilotta said.

Mary Beth Carpenter, Bilotta's niece and owner of the property, said she talked to Westminster's animal control officer at length about Wednesday's attack.

"I have two small children and we were about to go join (Bilotta) right before it happened," she said by phone Friday. "It could have been them."

Lt. Mike McDonald of the Westminster Police said emergency personnel went to the scene at 1:34 p.m. Wednesday.

He said Officer Jason Wetherbee arrived to find Bilotta, who had suffered bites to her forearm. Paramedics took her to UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, McDonald said.

Police took the dog to the station and the animal control officer checked it out, McDonald said. They determined the dog did not pose a danger and released it back to its owner, he said.

The dog may have bit Bilotta because she moved quickly, McDonald said.

"The victim picked up the young boy really quickly," he said. "The animal might have reacted to that."

Police are not charging the dog's owner, Jeffrey Hotchkiss of Old Oak Avenue, at this time, he said.

Hotchkiss could not be reached for comment Friday.

A 140-pound English mastiff dog attacked and killed 7-year-old Connor Lourens of Lunenburg in February.

McDonald said Westminster has a restraining law for dogs. If a dog is gentle and can be controlled by voice command, it doesn't need a leash. More unruly dogs need leashes, he said.

Christy Kimball, another niece of Bilotta's who also lives on Old Oak Avenue, said the restraint law is not enforced. Four dogs are "chronically running around" in the neighborhood, with no owners in sight, she said in a phone interview Friday.

"I can't walk my dog by myself in the neighborhood because other people aren't responsible for pets," she said. "You're not afraid of crime or other people, but people are afraid of their neighbors' dogs."

Last year, an American bulldog came out and bit the family's basset hound as her husband walked it, she said.

"My husband had to beat the dog off with a bottle," she said. "Our dog was covered in blood."

After Wednesday's incident, she said, the neighbors are on guard.

"I know that this week, people have been afraid to take their children outside," she said. "Everyone I've spoken to in the neighborhood is concerned."

Carpenter said she would like to see a stronger leash law, or better enforcement of the restraining law on the books.

Selectman John Fairbanks said he pushed for a leash law a few years ago, but residents voted it down at town meeting.

"If people were more responsible, there wouldn't be a need for it," he said.

Fairbanks and his wife often see unleashed, unattended dogs in their neighborhood, he said.

"Fortunately, most of the dogs are friendly," he said, but "you just don't know until you see the dog four or five times."

He said Wednesday's incident might spur selectmen to once again attempt passing a leash law.

Town Coordinator Karen Murphy said a complaint regarding unrestrained dogs last came before the selectmen about a year-and-a-half ago.

Early Friday afternoon, only one dog could be seen wandering on Old Oak Avenue. A few homes had barking dogs inside the house, and one house had a dog on a leash outside.

One neighbor said he wasn't worried about dogs in the area.

"I used to be a mailman. I was bitten half a dozen times," said Malcolm Brown.