

Dog bite victim seeks change in Oregon law

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COOS BAY — It was nearly 19 months ago, but Sara Weidenhaft is still haunted by the animal's amber eyes just moments after it ripped her lips apart.

It remains a part of every word that escapes her mangled lips, every stare from a stranger. And it's a part of her resolve to change a law.

She had leaned into a truck to hug the dog's owner.

"He bit it off," Weidenhaft said through a small opening where her lips once were. "I didn't even know the dog was in the car until he had my lip in his mouth."

She has had five surgeries to repair the damage and faces more.

She didn't press charges or try to have the dog put down, but learned that in Oregon, the owner of a normally friendly dog is not liable for damages after a first-time attack. The dog's owner, a friend of Weidenhaft's, paid \$5,000 through her insurance company, but didn't have to.

Insurance has covered most of the surgery but she doesn't believe she alone should have to pay the rest.

"So far my surgeries are in excess of \$66,000 and I'm still not fixed," Weidenhaft, 52, told lawmakers at a hearing in Salem for House Bill 2345, a dog-bite measure proposed by Rep. Wayne Krieger, R-Gold Beach.

The dog's owner would be responsible for medical expenses but the owner would retain defenses such as provocation of the dog.

"If a dog comes into my pasture and kills one of my sheep, not only can I kill the dog ... I can collect up to three times the value of the sheep. But, if a dog bites my lip off, I have to pay? Something isn't right with this picture," Weidenhaft said.

Oregon is among several states that never altered dog-bite laws that date from 16th-century England, Krieger said.

He said a poor family whose child is attacked by a dog may not be able to afford reconstructive surgery. "Not many (young families) have \$50,000, \$60,000, or \$70,000 for reconstructive surgery."

Weidenhaft, an animal lover with a ranch, says she doesn't hate the dog.

But she says she wants people to realize they don't know dogs as well as they think they do, or what they will do.

Weidenhaft said she thinks the Great Dane reacted to his owner's surprise when she leaned in for the hug.

Her husband, Ted Weidenhaft said they are working through the impact the incident has caused.

"He still loves me no matter how ugly I am," Weidenhaft said.

Recalling an encounter with a former classmate, Weidenhaft said she realized how insensitive people can be.

"I met her in an aisle at the grocery store and she said to me 'I didn't remember you as being a harelip,'" Weidenhaft said, her eyes quickly tearing. "I said to her, 'Well, I wasn't until a dog bit my lip off,' "

She hopes future surgeries will even out her features and her speech.

"I want to look normal."

"I knew one (surgery) wasn't going to fix it, but each one of these steps is like taking several steps backward. I had no idea that I would be having a sixth, or a seventh or an eighth surgery."

Insurance industry representatives say a law change could mean higher premiums for dog owners.

Shawn Miller, a lobbyist for Oregon insurance companies, said each insurance agency has a different policy regarding dogs and dog bites. Most will alter coverage after a dog has attacked.

Weidenhaft said passage won't erase the memories or medical bills.

"I've been a victim to a dog. I've been a victim to a law. I can't change what the dog did, but I can change the law," Weidenhaft said.

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