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Dog attack leaves residents in fear

By Ashley Ratcliff, Peninsula News  
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RPV — One resident's attempt at being a good Samaritan went horribly awry when two roaming dogs attacked her pet and then turned on her.

It all started at about 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 17, when two nannies, Esther Salinas and Virginia Rodriguez, were walking near Tarragon and Barkentine roads and were "corralled" by two German shepherds. Paralyzed by fear, the women called their friend, Maria Lyons of Rancho Palos Verdes, to help fend off the large animals.

By the time Lyons came to the rescue of the two women, a passerby known only as "Christina" had secured the dogs with ropes and used the information on the dogs' collars to contact the owner, Renata Heindl.

"They didn't look friendly. I think most people are [afraid] to see the sheer size of the animal. They did look tired, dirty, unkempt. They were kind of wet, so I don't know if somebody sprayed them to get them away. They looked like they had missed a few meals. We had no idea when the dogs had left [their home]," Lyons said.

Things took an interesting turn when Christina released the animals to Lyons, who said she reluctantly took the dogs into her garage to prevent them from threatening another resident or harming children at a nearby preschool.

According to Lyons, between her and her neighbors' accounts, this marked the fourth time the dogs were seen roving the neighborhood since February 2007.

Before Lyons could shut the garage door that adjoins the garden door, the two dogs, which moments before appeared calm, pushed their way through and grabbed hold of Lyon's dog, Greta, who was napping under an avocado tree, she said. The male dog grabbed Greta by the neck and the female dog was biting her undercarriage and began violently pulling.

"I was screaming at the top of my lungs, 'No! Get off!' ... The only thing I can do was ... grab the [male's] nose," Lyons said. "I put my two fingers in the nostrils and pulled back. That's how I got bitten. When I did that, the dog stood on his hind legs. I threw him into the garage. As soon as he let go of the grab he had on my dog, the female stopped and followed the male into the garage."

However, Heindl said the passerby arranged to meet her on Hawthorne Boulevard to return the dogs. She said she didn't understand why Lyons took the dogs into her home and tried to fend the dogs off by herself when they attacked Greta.

"She tried to get them apart, and you don't intervene in a dog fight, you turn on a hose. You lift up their back legs ... I don't blame her. She tried to get them apart, [she] was afraid that her dog would get killed," Heindl said, adding that it was only the second time that her dogs left her property.

Willie, the 10 1/2-year-old male, and Adina, the 7 1/2-year-old female, generally are well-mannered pets, Heindl said, and get along with her three cats and grandchildren.

"They're very friendly — they kiss, they lick you all over ... They don't attack people," she said.

Adina also was bitten and was taken to the vet. Heindl said she has no idea how the dogs got out. "The other dog is so old, and I cannot believe that he went down the hill. He barely can walk at home ... I would have put them down if they attacked somebody walking. They would be gone already — no way," Heindl said.

Animal Control placed Willie and Adina under a 10-day quarantine at their home, where Heindl said she keeps them in her bedroom or in extra large kennels in the backyard.

Heindl sent Lyons a get-well note expressing her sympathy. She said she would be willing to help cover Lyons' medical expenses.

"I'm so sorry ... I just can't believe it ... There's no words how you can express yourself ... I don't feel it's all totally my fault. I do feel responsible," Heindl said.

Despite the attack, Lyons immediately drove her 75-pound German shepherd mix to the veterinarian and then herself to Torrance Memorial Medical Center.

Lyons' 4-year-old dog suffered puncture wounds to her neck, groin area and nose. Lyons has 16 puncture wounds and several bruises and cuts on her back and legs.

The injuries aren't life threatening, and both Lyons and Greta are on the road to recovery.

"[Greta's] a happy camper like nothing ever happened, tail wagging ... She's eating fine," Lyons said. "The vet told me she did a very good job at defending herself, but honestly, if it had gone on for another five minutes, I think they would've done her in."

Help is on the way?

Lyons said finding help after the attack was difficult.

Her neighbor, Mike Garcia, called 9-1-1 for the Lomita Sheriff's Station. But according to Lyons, deputies refused to come out because he wasn't the victim or the property owner.

He encountered the same problem when he contacted the Los Angeles Department of Animal Care and Control, Lyons said. Mike was told that Animal Control couldn't pick up the attacking dogs because the police must be present since the property owner wasn't, Lyons said.

However, Capt. Gary MacCleverty of L.A. County Fire Station No. 53 in RPV said the fire department would have been sent out under those circumstances.

"If you call 9-1-1 and you say that I've been attacked and bitten by a dog, we're going to show up ... Our responsibility is to human beings," he said.

Lt. Doreen Alcaraz of the Lomita Station said dog attacks are handled by Animal Control, but officials sometimes rely on law enforcement's support.

"If they have to go in a backyard, they're often limited because they don't have police officer powers. If people don't cooperate, that's when [Animal Control] calls us," Alcaraz said.

Nicole, an Animal Control employee, said the agency's procedure is to immediately send an officer out when a dog attacks, quarantine the animal and fill out a report. Dogs aren't terminated on the first offense and the policy varies depending on the situation, she said.

It is Lyons' hope that the dogs will be terminated. She is in the process of filing a Declaration of a Dangerous and Vicious Dog, which includes eyewitness accounts, photos of the attack, and all the expenses and medical bills to determine if the case will go to court.

"We can't afford another encounter over here, especially with the children [in the area]," Lyons said.

Lyons expressed her frustration with the system.

"Until there's another incident, then that's when they'll remove the animals," she said. "So it makes me think if I had died, I'd be incident No. 1. There would have to be another incident before they could remove the animal."

Sharon Cowley, Lyons' neighbor, shared her concern about Animal Control's protocol. "The sad part of the whole thing is ... they're waiting for another attack before they do something. This attack, to me, was quite severe. So what are [the dogs] going to do, kill somebody?" she asked.

#### Community on edge

At this point, Lyons is unsure if she will press charges against the owners of the dogs.

"I'm so depressed because I can't get rid of those dogs," she said. "You have to go through all this rigmarole and there's no guarantee that they'll remove the animals from the owner ... [The dogs will] come down again. They already know how to get here."

More than a week after the incident, residents still remain shaken.

"It's scary now to walk dogs when those guys could get out," Cowley said. "I don't even think we would be safe with two people walking our two little dogs, because what can you do when they come up to you? ... We'll both end up dead."

Salinas urged the authorities to "help us do something about those animals because you have to be very careful when those animals come around. Basically, they terrorize the neighborhood. Remove the dogs. Put them to sleep — do something."

To protect herself in the future, Lyons said she'll carry mace or pepper spray whenever she goes out.

If there is a stray animal present, go where it's safe and call Animal Control at (310) 523-9566. Animal Control also can be reached by selecting Option 1 for an attack that's in progress. If you've been injured during an animal attack, call 9-1-1 or the Fire Department directly.

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Maria Lyons, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident, demonstrates on a stuffed animal how her dog, Greta, was attacked by two German shepherds last week. As you can see on her right forearm, Lyons sustained about 16 puncture wounds during the attack, when she tried to fend off the two animals.