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SPOTSYLVANIA DOG ATTACK CASE: Manslaughter trial opens

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SPOTSYLVANIA -- The alleged owner of three dogs that fatally mauled an 82-year-old Spotsylvania County woman was "irresponsible, reckless and uncaring," a prosecutor told jurors yesterday.

He added that the animals tore the victim "literally to pieces."

Photographs displayed at the involuntary manslaughter trial of

Deanna H. Large depicted the gruesome damage the dogs, described as pit bulls, inflicted on Dorothy Sullivan: The top of her scalp had been ripped off, among other injuries. Her arms, back and thigh bore scores of bloody bite marks.

Judge Ann Hunter Simpson of Spotsylvania Circuit Court barred media cameras in the courtroom from recording the graphic images.

If Large, 37, is convicted, she faces up to 10 years in prison in a case that could set a legal precedent in Virginia.

During opening statements yesterday, Spotsylvania Commonwealth's Attorney William F. Neely told jurors that Large owned all three pit bulls, although she admitted to owning only one of the dogs allegedly involved in the March 8 attack.

Neely said an FBI lab expert will testify today that hair found in the digestive tract of the dog Large admitted owning is "consistent" with samples of Sullivan's hair. Also, a choke-chain collar and a small brass padlock found on one of the other two dogs matches collars and padlocks that investigators seized from Large's house, the prosecutor said.

Defense attorney Eugene Frost contends that the prosecution's evidence is inconclusive, adding that the dog Large admitted owning did not have any blood on it when located about 20 minutes after the attack. Frost also is seeking to depict the rural Partlow neighborhood as one beset by roaming dogs, some of them pit bulls.

The defense is scheduled to present its case today. The trial could last into tomorrow.

Sullivan was mauled while walking her Shih Tzu, Buttons, in her own yard. The small dog was also killed, and the two were buried together.

Doris Phelps, one of Sullivan's daughters, told jurors she had stopped by the afternoon of the attack to check on her widowed mother. Phelps testified she had just stepped out of her car when she saw three snarling dogs approaching her. She ran into the house.

"The house was very quiet. I started calling for my mother, for Buttons, and there was no answer," Phelps said, weeping as she testified.

She ventured outside twice more but was set upon by the dogs, which she estimated closed to within 4 or 5 feet of her. She called 911 and watched helplessly as her mother lay near a treeline. "They were standing over her," she said of the dogs.

The dogs retreated, but two then re-entered Sullivan's yard from woods separating her house from Large's property. A sheriff's deputy testified he shot the dogs as one of them charged, killing one and mortally wounding the other.

An animal-control officer testified he saw a third dog emerge from woods and onto Large's property, about a quarter-mile from Sullivan's home. Large admitted owning that dog, which Phelps identified as one of three that she saw. It was later destroyed.

Neely, the prosecutor, has said he must prove that Large knew, or should have known, that her dogs were dangerous. They had not previously been declared "dangerous" by a judge under Virginia law.



Neely called several neighbors as he attempted to show Large had been put on notice that her dogs were a menace. But the neighbors offered varied and sometimes inconsistent accounts in court yesterday. Some neighbors said they knew Large owned the dogs because the dogs headed in the direction of her home when the neighbors chased them away. Others were more definite, referring to the dogs by name.

Bill Clarke, an animal-control officer, testified he told Large on two occasions that he had received reports of pit bulls killing a neighbor's German shepherd and possibly killing another neighbor's cat.

Frost, the defense attorney, asked Clarke why he hadn't impounded any of Large's dogs.

"You had no reason to believe her dogs were dangerous at that point, did you?" Frost said.

"They hadn't done anything," Clarke replied.

Neely has said he is in "uncharted territory" in prosecuting an involuntary-manslaughter charge in connection with a dog attack in Virginia. He has found only one other case involving such a charge in a dog mauling, in Amherst County in the mid-1960s. That prosecution was not successful, he says.

Large is also charged with three misdemeanor counts of letting a dog run at large. She faces a maximum \$250 fine on each of those three charges.

Meanwhile, Virginia lawmakers next month will consider several measures aimed at toughening the state's dog laws, including specifying a felony charge when a dog severely injures or kills a person. The State Crime Commission has looked at revisiting the manslaughter law but has been reluctant to consider any changes before this case comes to trial.

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