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BOY RECOVERING FROM DOG ATTACK MISSED DEATH BY A MINUTE, MOTHER SAYS

Claudia Pinto; Claudia Pinto is a staff writer at The Daily Progress in Charlottesville.

Shirley Morris believes her 4-year-old son missed death by only a minute. A pit bull savagely mauled Jeffrey while he was visiting his cousin in Rocky Mount 2 1/2 months ago. The dog ripped off Jeffrey's ears and eyelids, bit off huge chunks of his scalp and face, exposing his skull, and narrowly missed a major artery.

"Had it gone on another minute he wouldn't be here," said Morris, a mother of four. "As it was, the doctor [at Carilion Roanoke Community Hospital] told me he didn't know if he was going to be able to save him."

Jeffrey survived, but the attack left him disfigured.

"His nose was the only thing the dog didn't get," Morris said.

Jeffrey left the Roanoke hospital and returned to his home in Charlottesville 10 days after the attack. A few days after his homecoming, he asked to look at himself.

"I let him," Morris said. "I wasn't going to keep any secrets from him. When he saw himself he just kept saying, 'No. Na-Eh.'"

She said the emotional pain of being rejected by his peers hurts Jeffrey more than any physical pain he's experienced.

"Some of the kids make fun of him and it hurts his feelings," Morris said. "Kids can be the cruelest people on earth. One of his little friends ran away at the sight of him."

According to Morris, Jeffrey has endured three surgeries, totaling 20 hours and involving almost 2,000 stitches. The boy's ears and eyelids were reattached and the nerves in his face have been restored.

Morris quit her job at a Charlottesville day-care center so she could care for Jeffrey, who has had to return to Roanoke regularly for medical treatment.

The costs of Jeffrey's care are being covered by Medicaid, Morris said.

Dr. Kurt Chen, one of Jeffrey's surgeons, said Jeffrey will need several more reconstructive operations over the next year, largely to correct scarring.

"In a year's time he should be looking like himself again," Chen said.

On a recent afternoon, Jeffrey wasn't thinking about the attack, or about having more surgeries, or about the kids who make fun of him. He was too busy pretending to be Bo Duke from the 1980s TV show "The Dukes of Hazzard."

"Ye-Ha!" Jeffrey yelled, as he sent a model of the car from the series, the General Lee, scooting across the carpet of his mother's living room. "I'm a good ol' boy."

Morris said that the boy's hobbies include pretending to be Bo Duke and waiting for the mail to come.

"He's gotten some 95 get-well cards," Morris said. "Every day he asks, 'Me got mail? Me got mail?'"

Despite what lies ahead, Morris believes the worst is over.

"His nightmares have stopped," Morris said. "In the beginning, he was always having nightmares. He'd cry and kick, and there was nothing you could do because if you tried to hold him he'd kick the daylight out of you."

She added that she isn't angry with her niece, Michelle Morris, who was watching Jeffrey when the attack occurred. The 14-month-old pit bull, named Kilo, belonged to Michelle Morris and her boyfriend, Charles Stump. The couple also owned two pit bull puppies that weren't involved in the attack.

"There was no way she could have known," Shirley Morris said. "He had played with the dogs the whole weekend. Everywhere he went, the dogs went. He even slept with them."

Morris credited her niece, who pulled the dog off Jeffrey's bloodied body, with saving her son.

"She handled it real well," Morris said. "Jeffrey was crying, saying he couldn't see and she said, 'It's OK, baby. The lights just went out.'"

Animal-control officers put Kilo to sleep after checking him for rabies. Stump shot the two puppies, Morris said.

"When he did it he was thinking about Jeffrey," she said. "He didn't want it to happen to another child."

But Stump was arrested after killing the pups and charged with animal cruelty.

Morris said Stump's trial is set for later this month.

"This whole thing has been quite an ordeal," Morris concluded. "I swear I'm going to be gray-headed by the time it's over."

Get-well cards may be sent to Jeffrey Morris at 2111 Michie Drive, Apt. 48, Charlottesville, VA 22901.

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OWNER WHO SHOT PUPPIES ACQUITTED

[City Edition]

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[Charles Stump] shot the puppies in early March after his dog Kilo mauled Jeffrey Morris. The dog ripped off the boy's ears and eyelids, bit off huge chunks of his scalp and face, exposing his skull, and narrowly missed a principal artery.

"The judge felt that [Stump] didn't commit a crime because he put his dogs down in a manner that wasn't extremely cruel," [Cliff Hapgood] said. "Also, it wasn't arbitrary. There was a reason why he did it. It wasn't that he just got up one day and said 'I'm going to kill those dogs.' [Stump] said that he was afraid that they might attack someone else at some future point."

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