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Hear 911 call: Witness tried to stop fatal attack

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911 call: Two dogs kill jogger in Lapeer County: Craig Sytsma, a 46-year-old Livonia man, was fatally attacked by two loose dogs while jogging Wednesday evening in Lapeer County. Hear 911 call as neighbors try to save Sytsma's life.

By Elisha Anderson, Robert Allen and Eric Lawrence

Craig Sytsma left work Wednesday evening and went on a run along the shoulder of a rural road in Metamora Township.

A man mowing his lawn waved at Sytsma, a 46-year-old Livonia man, who politely waved back. The man said he continued mowing the lawn and the next time he saw Sytsma, he was in a nearby ditch being attacked by two loose dogs.

Detroit Free Press Staff Writers

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"He yelled at the dogs," Lapeer County Sheriff's Office Det. Sgt. Jason Parks said. "They would not release."

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The man who had been mowing shot a handgun into the air. Still, the dogs would not let go. So he shot a dog, grazing it in the side.

That ended the attack, Parks said. The dogs returned to the home next door to where the owner lived.

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Craig Sytsma, a 46-year-old Livonia man, was fatally attacked by two dogs in Lapeer County. / Courtesy of Mark Raitanen

There were two other witnesses, according to police, including a woman who is a medic and performed CPR. Sytsma, who didn't have a cell phone or ID on him, told her his name was Craig before he lost consciousness.

Sytsma was pronounced dead at the hospital about an hour after the first call to 911. It wasn't until Thursday morning, when his coworkers showed up at Eltro Services in Oxford and noticed his car was still there and suspected something was amiss, that authorities could identify him.

The owner has surrendered the dogs, two Cane Corsos, an exotic breed bred to hunt wild boar in their native Italy, according to animal control officials.

The fate of the dogs is pending, but authorities said they want them put down given the "vicious nature of this attack."

"They're a public threat," Parks said. "They're

Craig Sytsma, 46, shown with his 2-year-old granddaughter, Leylah Sytsma, died Wednesday evening after he was attacked by a pair of Cane Corsos while jogging. / Family photo

beyond rehabilitation."

He said nobody can recall a fatality in Lapeer County caused by an animal attack before Wednesday's incident.

The dogs' owner — who thus far has not been charged with any crime related to the fatal mauling — moved to the Metamora community in 2011, authorities said. Besides the dogs already surrendered, he has two more, including another adult Cane Corso and multiple puppies.

His dogs have been involved in two other attacks, one in 2012 and the other in 2013. And, according to neighbors, had a rough reputation.

"Unfortunately, I wasn't surprised," neighbor Ashley Winter, 31, said of the fatal attack.

She recalls meeting the owner and his Cane Corsos shortly after moving to the neighborhood in June 2012. The man came to introduce himself and had a full-sized pet hawk on his arm; one of the Corso dogs was running loose, she said.

"I said, 'Is he aggressive?' And he said, 'Yeah, everything I own is aggressive,' " Winter said. "I thought, 'What have we gotten ourselves into?' "

At least once a week for the next couple years, the dogs would appear in her yard, swim in her pond and sometimes go inside her garage, she said. She and her family avoided confrontation, teaching her 4-year-old daughter Mikayla not to run away if she ever saw one of them outside.

They never had an attack, she said. She reported them to animal control and was told to capture them or talk to the owner. But, she said, she was too scared to approach the house because of the

dogs.

Attorney Glenn Saltsman, who represented April Smith after she was bitten by one of the dogs in 2012, said a male neighbor in his 70s also was bitten in November 2013 while walking near the house on the 5500 block of Thomas Road.

The man was bitten twice in the calf, had puncture wounds and stitches to repair tears, with permanent scarring. Smith said her leg was torn in three places from the bites; she lost a substantal amount of blood and had to go through physical therapy to recover.

Saltsman said the two were “very lucky,” given the dogs’ ferocity, that their injuries weren’t more severe.

“Unfortunately, the recent victim wasn’t so lucky,” he said. “These people know full well what’s been going on with their dogs, and they’ve chosen to do absolutely nothing about it... I don’t know for the life of me why the authorities never took these dogs away.”

The large, white house where the dogs live is on a hill with no fence. Nobody came to the door when the Free Press visited Friday, but one dog could be heard barking loudly.

An attorney who previously represented the dog owners didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment Friday.

Sylvester Gajewski, 71, has lived up the street from the house since 1978. He said he usually carries some pebbles and a rock when he goes for a jog, just in case he comes across dogs.

Now, he said, he might carry a firearm.

At the same time, he said he’s not ready to judge the dogs’ owner, who he said is a good neighbor.

“The owner had no idea probably that these dogs were so vicious,” he said. “I know the guy; he’s a nice person. He’s not out to raise killer dogs, or fighter dogs, or something like that. He’s a good member of this community, and now he’s in big trouble.”

Not far from the home of two dogs that apparently mauled Sytsma to death stands a sign: “Missing; daughter’s kitten; approx. 14-wks-old.”

It’s not a coincidence.

Winter said she placed the sign there hoping it would get the neighbor’s attention.

Jewels, the female kitten, has been missing since Memorial Day. It’s the fourth she’s had that has disappear in the past three years. She said she’s suspicious the dogs, or even the hawk, could have had something to do with it. But it’s also a rural area, so she said there are any number of possibilities.

She said that if those Cane Corsos killed Sytsma, they should be euthanized.

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