



Inspiring change

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By [TIM UNRUH](#)

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Caitlyn Forsberg can't recall the horrifying moments in her backyard on May 4, 2004, when two uninvited pit bulls mauled her.

Or that her dog, Osh Gosh, threw himself at the intruders so she could escape.

"He saved my life," Caitlyn said, repeating only what she's been told in the six-plus years since the attack.

"He's awesome," she said.

Now an opinionated third-grader who bounds out the back door each day after school to see her aging hero, Caitlyn, 9, refuses to look at pictures of her swollen, bloody face.

"Ugly!" she said, shaking her head.

Wounds have healed and the scars have nearly vanished, but the bond between Caitlyn and her golden retriever nicknamed "Goshy," now age 12 or 13, is tighter than ever.

Both are oblivious of the role they played in shaping Salina's future.

"We just go outside and play," she said.

One glimpse of Caitlyn was all it took to sway public opinion away from vicious dog breeds in the spring and summer of 2004.

She was the poster child in a Salina debate of an ordinance implementing tight restrictions on pit bulls and banning any new dogs of that breed from the city.

"It's terrible to say, but it always seems like something bad's got to happen before something good does," said Rose Base, director of the Salina Animal Shelter, who lobbied for the ordinance.

The ordinance has made a difference, she said. Records at the Salina Animal Shelter indicate there were 24 reported pit bull bites in 2003 and 2004, and only five since -- none from 2009 to present.

Salina has 62 registered pit bulls, Base said. Before the ordinance she guessed there were "close to 300." Since the first of this year three of the registered pit bulls have died of old age.

"We definitely haven't had the severity of bites that we had in the past," Base said. "Our community has been somewhat safer because of the law that was passed."

Caitlyn was pivotal, said Donnie Marrs, a local architect who was a Salina city commissioner at the time.

"All I had to do was see that little girl, and it was easy," Marrs said. "There was no question about who you had to side with."

Before the attack, Marrs and fellow city commissioner Alan Jilka had said they weren't in favor of a breed-specific ordinance in Salina. Less than two months after the attack, both voted to approve one.

Two days after the attack, Caitlyn's picture was splashed in full color on the Salina Journal front page.

Ordinance sought

Among the hard-hitting moments spawned by the issue was a May 10, 2004, commission meeting, when Caitlyn's mother, Kellie Forsberg, spoke about the need for a vicious dog ordinance. Her ex-husband, Ryan Forsberg, arrived with Caitlyn, then 3. Kellie Forsberg took her daughter to the table where commissioners Paul Webb, Debbie Divine and Jilka were seated, listening to discussion about pit bulls. Marrs and then-mayor Monte Shadwick were absent that day.

"This is what (pit bulls) did to my daughter's face," Kellie Forsberg was quoted as saying at the meeting.

The family wanted vicious dogs banned from the city.

"I want to know why my daughter had to have her face almost ripped off," Kellie Forsberg said at the meeting.

Taking Caitlyn -- the room was packed, and the crowd spilled into the hallway -- was a decision made by her parents.

"We weren't trying to parade her in front of everybody. We looked at what happened to Caitlyn, having to deal with that. We couldn't let this happen to somebody else," Ryan Forsberg said. "We thought it would get our message across, of what those dogs were capable of doing."

One of the pit bulls had tunneled under and the other jumped a fence from a neighbor's yard and attacked Caitlyn.

Ryan Forsberg said he heard a scream, and Caitlyn came running in the house at 1520 Cheyenne. Her face was bleeding.

"I tried to find out what happened. About all I could get was that the dog bit her. At first, I thought it was Osh Gosh," her father recalled. As he began to clean Caitlyn's wounds, Ryan heard fighting outside. He found Osh Gosh in a battle with the two pit bulls.

"I just let'em go. The first thing was getting Caitlyn to the hospital," Ryan Forsberg said. "I kinda had to leave (Osh Gosh) to fend for himself and hope for the best."

Caitlyn underwent three hours of surgery to repair damage to her face, including a detached eyelid. Stitches were required on 18 different areas of her face.

The two attacking dogs were euthanized, and their owner, Christopher Stone, was ticketed for having vicious dogs. He was found guilty in July 2004 for failure to have city tags, having a nuisance animal, allowing an animal to run at large and failing to vaccinate one of the dogs. Stone was ordered to pay \$835 in fines and fees.

Civil settlement

In 2007, Kellie Forsberg settled a civil lawsuit against the dogs' owner and his landlord.

"We got a little (money) outta the deal, enough to pay for Caitlyn's college, or a good chunk of it," Ryan Forsberg said.

His daughter initially eyed veterinary school, but lately she's been learning toward paleontology.

Osh Gosh required treatment for several puncture wounds from his jaw to his shoulders, and some medication for infections, but made a full recovery.

The dog's veterinarian, Norman Morrow, of Salina, nominated Osh Gosh for the Kansas Veterinary Medical Association Pet Hero of the Year award. Morrow presented Osh Gosh the award at a banquet in Wichita during January 2005.

Ryan Forsberg, 34, still has a box full of well-wishing letters and pictures, many from strangers. One company from Kansas City sent a package of toys and treats to Osh Gosh.

"It was kind of overwhelming for awhile," Ryan said.

The dog's heroism was featured in a National Enquirer article, and the "Inside Edition" television show. Caitlyn, Osh Gosh and her parents were flown to New York to appear on the "Maury Povich" talk show.

Caitlyn recalled some of that adventure, the airplane ride and the hotel, not to mention that "Osh Gosh puked, and I spilled pop all over my dress."

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