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Powerful Dogs Maul Woman, Kill Her S.F. neighbors' pets lunged down hallway

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A San Francisco woman died last night after being attacked inside her apartment building by two English mastiff and Canary

Island cattle dogs as the dogs' horrified owner struggled to pull them away.

The leashed dogs -- with a combined weight of 233 pounds -- bolted from Marjorie Knoller's Pacific Heights apartment, dragged her down the hallway and lunged for the 32-year-old victim's throat as she frantically tried to open her front door, police and witnesses said.

The animals mauled the victim for about five minutes before Knoller, who was also bloodied in the 4 p.m. melee, could pull them back into her apartment at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Fillmore Street.

The victim died at 8:55 p.m. at San Francisco General Hospital, where she had undergone surgery for deep bite wounds on her throat. Authorities withheld her name at her family's request.

Paramedics had performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation as they raced the unconscious woman, who was near death and bleeding profusely, to the hospital.

"When she arrived . . . she was in full cardiac arrest," said Dr. S. Marshall Isaacs, an emergency room physician. "There were no signs of life."

Surgeons worked

Surgeons spent almost two hours repairing the veins and arteries of her neck. Some of wounds were 1 1/2 inches deep, Isaacs said, and doctors had to insert a tube into her throat to support her trachea. She remained in "very critical" condition for 70 minutes after surgery before dying.

Detectives initiated an investigation into the attack almost immediately.

"They need to determine if anything criminal occurred," said Police Lt. Mary Stasko. "Right now

it's a horrible accident. But they'll interview people to see if there's any history of aggression or any negligence."

The attack came as Knoller returned from walking the dogs around her Pacific Heights neighborhood, police investigators said. The victim apparently arrived home at about the same time.

The dogs were still on their leashes when they bolted from Knoller's sixth-floor apartment and bounded 15 feet down the hallway toward the victim, who was unlocking her door, police and witnesses said.

Bane, a 2 1/2-year-old male bullmastiff weighing 120 pounds, grabbed the victim by the throat, police said. A 2-year-old female named Hera and weighing 113 pounds joined the attack moments later.

A struggle

Knoller struggled to pull the dogs off of the screaming woman, said Robert Noel, Knoller's husband.

"My wife was covered with blood from the top of her head to her feet," said Noel, who arrived just after the attack ended. "Most of it was somebody else's (blood)."

Witnesses painted a harrowing picture of the attack.

"She was screaming in a major way," said David Kuenzi of New York, who was visiting a friend in the building. "I personally thought she was being mugged or raped."

Police and paramedics found the woman lying in blood, with bloody handprints covering the walls. Bits of clothing littered the floor, and a blood-soaked green nylon leash was lying nearby.

"It was a gruesome scene," said San Francisco Police Officer Leslie Forrestal. "There was shredded clothing, obviously a lot of blood. It was horrific."

Tranquilizers used

Animal control officers fired three tranquilizer darts into Bane before removing him and Hera from Knoller's apartment. They remained locked up last night in the city's animal shelter.

Noel, an attorney, said he obtained the dogs several months ago from a family that planned to breed the dogs before giving them up.

"They weren't really being taken care of very well," he said. "They apparently had been chained out in the weather."

Noel said the animals had no history of aggression and had seen the victim on several occasions without acting aggressive.

"I've had 80-year-old ladies want to come up and pet them," he said. "The dogs have always been really people-friendly."

But some of Noel's neighbors said they were intimidated by the animals' imposing size and always gave them a wide berth.

"People are visibly taken aback when they see the size of these dogs," said Ed Lewis, who lives on the fifth floor. "When neighbors have complained, they (the owners) have been standoffish."

The last dog attack that made headlines in San Francisco occurred on last March when Sidney, an Old English sheepdog, bit San Francisco police officer Jennifer Dorantes.

The attack came as Dorantes and her partner, Officer Julian Ng, responded to a 911 call at a home in the Castro-Amazon district. Ng fired at the dog and missed, instead wounding his partner and an 11-year-old boy in the house.

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