

## Breed-specific laws target even heroic pit bulls

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By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

When the deadly cottonmouth snake struck out at "her" children, Dixie never hesitated. The dog pushed the children aside, putting her 50-pound body between them and the snake. Dixie saved Frank Humphries, 9, and his 7-year-old twin siblings, Katie and Codi. But the venomous snake inflicted two bites on the face of the 16-month-old dog.

Valerie Humphries of Fayetteville, Ga., -- the children's mother and Dixie's co-owner -- killed the snake with an ax and rushed the dog to veterinarian Françoise Tyler. "Seeing Dixie's unconscious body in the arms of that doctor was one of the worst things I've ever been through," Humphries said. "Dr. Tyler had to keep her for several days, hooked up to intravenous antibiotics."

Then the vet nominated Dixie for the Hero Dog category in a contest sponsored by the Georgia Veterinary Medical Association. Dixie won over 300 nominated dogs and this month is being inducted into the Georgia Animal Hall of Fame.

Now here comes one of the cheapest writing tricks in the book -- the "O'Henry ending":

Dixie is a pit bull.

The breed of a hero-dog shouldn't matter, really. But it does matter because this is a breed of dog that is feared, hated and reviled by so many people, including many who call themselves animal lovers.

Many individuals and organizations, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, are trying to outlaw this breed. They can't stop at merely despising pit bulls and related breeds, including American Staffordshire terriers and Staffordshire bull terriers. They want to outlaw pit bulls, even those owned by loving, responsible dog owners. Even child-loving life-savers like Dixie.

Dixie is reason enough to rail against breed-specific legislation -- laws that target an entire breed. Other breeds are under siege all over the country, especially rottweilers. Proposed legislation in other parts of the country target an ever-growing list of breeds, including boxers, Siberian huskies, Alaskan malamutes, Akitas, chow chows, German shepherds and Doberman pinschers.

Call me pro-choice on dog ownership. I think people who love dogs should be free to own as many dogs as we can take care of -- as long as we are loving, responsible owners and the dogs create no problems and pose no threat to people, property and other animals. We have the right to buy a pure-bred from a responsible breeder or to rescue a homeless mixed-breed from a shelter. And we should certainly be able to love the breed of our choice.

I put the 55-pound child that I love more than life itself in the company of a 75-pound sharp-toothed carnivore. I trust them together implicitly, for Mickey the Labrador retriever gazes upon my son, Dante, with looks that can only be love. It's what I love best about my dog and I would fight to keep him.

I will continue to fight for the right of people like the Humphries to keep dogs like Dixie. There are laws to "punish" people who let their dogs attack and bite. Use those laws. Don't target entire breeds.

In Toledo, Ohio, pit bulls who broke no law have been forcibly removed from their homes. Seized pit bulls have been killed before owners, lawyers and dog groups could save them. Right now in Washington, D.C., officials are trying to outlaw pit bulls. Dog lovers around the country are protesting by telephone, e-mail and "snail" mail. Others are traveling great distances to protest in person.

Breed-specific legislation is being enacted around the country. Think it couldn't happen to your dog or your breed? In Reading, Pa., a new law says all pit bulls are dangerous and owners will face special restrictions, including insurance

mandates, that most people will not be able to meet.

Other dogs will join the Reading list when a breed is responsible for 40 percent of dog bites in that town. This puts popular breeds like Labs and golden retrievers at high risk.

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