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News

Girl chooses to take rabies shots to save Bubba the bear

By Jaine Treadwell, The Messenger

For Anna Grafton, there was no choice to make.

She knew immediately what she would do.

It was not the bear's fault that she was bitten. She knew what she was doing. She took the risk. She would pay the price.

Anna furrowed her brow, sighed and smiled slightly as she talked about Bubba the Bear. Sweet Bubba, she called him.

I love animals, Anna said. All kinds of animals. Now that I have graduated, what I want to do is spend some time in the Galapagos Islands because they have such exotic wildlife. And, then I want to go to college and prepare myself for a career in some area of wildlife.

That's the way that Anna explained the reason she jumped at the chance to get in the pen with a brown bear and why she chose to take rabies shots after Sweet Bubba bit her.

Anna visited McClellan's Critters near Ebenezer on May 19 and was thrilled by the opportunity to see tigers, ligers, lions, bears and all the other fantastic animals at the zoo.

But the bear was my favorite, Anna said. He let us (Shelby Catrett) pet him and he was so sweet. I wasn't scared of him at all, and Mr. Mike (McClellan) was right there.

Bubba had been sniffing my dress. I guess because I had been playing with my dog and the scent was on it. I started to go to the other side of the cage so Shelby could have her picture taken with Bubba, but I guess he wasn't through sniffing me.

Anna she what happened next happened so fast that it's a blur.

Bubba just kind of grabbed me and bear nibbled me, she said. It was a real powerful hit to my thigh. I stumbled and kind of went to my knees.

Anna's lower leg and foot were scratched from the fall, but she didn't see the damage from the bite until later.

I went to my cousin's house and we were cleaning the scratches with peroxide, Anna said. My leg had started to really hurt, and when I lifted my dress, I saw the place where the bite was.

I called my mother and told her that I had got bitten by a bear. She thought I was teasing at first and then she told me to get home right then.

On Sunday, Anna visited SARHA, and the doctor there reported the incident to the Pike County Health Department.

On Monday night, we got a phone call from Mike McClellan saying that they were going to have to put his bear down, Anna's mother, Geraldine Umbehagen, said. The bear's head was going to have to be removed and sent off to be tested for rabies. I didn't want that to happen and knew it would really upset Anna because she loves animals so much.

Umbehagen said she talked with John McKeller, public health environmentalist with the Pike County Health Department, to see if there was some way the bear could be saved.

I asked him what would have happened if Anna had been bitten by a bear in the wild, Umbehagen said. He said she would have had to take rabies shots. I asked him if she could do that now. I knew that's what Anna would want to do.

McKeller talked with the state epidemiologist and called Umbehagen back a couple of hours later to tell her that was an option for Anna.

As soon as mama told me that I could take the shots and they wouldn't have to put Bubba down, I knew that's what I wanted to do, Anna said. It was not Bubba's fault. He was not vicious and he didn't deserved to be put down.

Anna heard horror stories about rabies shots. She was told that they are given in the stomach with long needles.

I didn't know until we got to the hospital that they give the shots now in the hip and the arm, she said. But it didn't really matter to me. I was going to take them anyway because that would save Bubba.

The doctor at the hospital in Dothan classified the bite injury as crushed tissue.

Because there was blood and saliva content to the injury Anna had to have the rabies shots or the bear had to be put down, Umbehagen said.

Anna is scheduled for eight shots, and she has taken six. She knows that she did the right thing. I couldn't let anything happen to Bubba, she said. He is a sweet bear and it's not his fault that I was I was in the pen with him. I won't do that again.

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News

Teen recovering after bear bite

By JAINE TREADWELL, The Messenger

A Pike County teenager is undergoing rabies shots after being bitten by a brown bear at McClellan's Critters zoo near Ebenezer on May 19.

John McKeller, Pike County public health environmentalist, said the incident was reported to his office by Troy physician, Dr. John Blough.

Physicians and hospitals are required by state law to report any animal bites, whether they be cat, dog, cow or bear bites, to the local health department, McKeller said. I contacted the state epidemiologist about the incident and then contacted Mike McClellan with the options that he had. He could either have the bear euthanized and the head removed so that I could get it to the state lab or to Auburn to be tested for rabies or the person bitten could take the rabies shots.

McKeller said he talked with the teenager's mother and the teenager chose to take the rabies shots rather than have the bear put down.

I was not there so I don't know the circumstances surrounding the incident, McKeller said. What I was told was that the teenager was in the cage with the bear and was bitten.

McKeller said even though the bear was in a captivity, it was still considered a wild animal and subject to the rules that apply to wild animals regarding bites.