When the Dog Bites...

... It's time to call in Christopher M. Davis

Frances Barnett went for a jog through her neighborhood in Marysville, a town north of Seattle, on a day like any other in October 2003. As she ran past the home of Nico, an 8-year-old deputy police dog, the off-duty German shepherd escaped from his owner's garage, shot across the street and viciously attacked her.

For attorneys W. Mitchell Cogdill and Christopher M. Davis, the consequences of dog attacks are all too familiar. Both have represented numerous dog-bite victims and understand their clients' deepest fear: "Literally, that they're going to be eaten up," says Cogdill. "That's how they all describe it."

Barnett endured excruciating bites that tore into her legs, back and shoulder before Nico retreated. When she tried to run away, he attacked again. Fortunately, a passing truck distracted the dog long enough to allow Barnett to crawl through a drainage ditch to safety.

Cogdill filed suit on her behalf against the city of Edmonds, for whose police department Nico's handler worked. The city admitted liability and settled in mediation. But the tragedy of a ferocious attack leaves more than physical scars.

"I think there's some sort of primal reaction to being attacked by another animal, and what that does to you emotionally," says Davis, founder of Davis Law Group in Seattle. "I think the natural reaction is just to avoid that animal—sometimes all animals in general."

Cogdill and Davis have different stories about becoming attorneys, but their reason for practicing law is the same: helping traumatized humans.

After law school at the University of Oregon, Davis didn't pursue a job at a big firm. "I knew that their clients typically were large corporations and businesses," he says. "I wanted to represent individuals, the person who's usually outgunned."

Since opening his own personal injury firm in 1994, Davis has become a familiar face in the media for high-profile cases including a wrongful death suit against Seattle Children's Hospital involving a 15-year-old autistic boy, and an insurance-claim case detailed on CNN's investigative show, Anderson Cooper's Keeping them Honest. His first dog-attack case came to him in the late '90s by way of a boy bitten by his grandmother's German shepherd. Davis helped the boy's parents make a claim against the grandmother's insurance company.

Since then, he's handled nearly 30 dog-attack cases. The ones involving children are the most taxing. "I'm a dog owner. I love dogs, and many of the cases I've had really angered me because I found that the dog owner was just totally irresponsible," he says. "And I think most people would be surprised that seven to eight times out of 10, in the cases I've handled, the victim is a child."

Once, when a father sought Davis' help after a dog he'd purchased through a pet ad attacked his 6-year-old daughter, Davis accepted, though the father had little means to pay and the case was complicated by the fact that the father had accepted ownership. "I was really moved by the injuries that this little girl suffered and I felt sorry for her, so I took the case and immediately filed suit," he says. The dog had ripped off a patch of the child's scalp and left several facial wounds, one of which barely missed her eye. Davis settled the case for $200,000.

Helping these clients through the recovery process offers some satisfaction to attorneys. "Nothing's ever going to change what happened to them, but being on the other end of it when they've made it through is rewarding," Davis says. To help answer many questions specific to dog-bite victims, and to raise awareness of the prevalence of dog attacks, Davis wrote When the Dog Bites: The Essential Guide To Dog Bite Claims in Washington. "I wanted to highlight what I see—that these can be very traumatic and life-changing injuries," Davis says.

Cogdill agrees. His client, Barnett, avoided dogs long after her attack by Nico. But he believes she took some comfort from his legal guidance.

- Adrienne Schofhauser

Davis loves dogs - including his pal Bogie. Irresponsible pet-owners are another matter.