

## THE COURTNEY TREMPE INQUEST

# Sharing a family's tragedy

*Donna and John Trempe mark the first anniversary of their daughter's death*

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
Staff Writer

The month of April used to give Donna and John Trempe so many reasons to celebrate.

Not only did it bring the usual rites of spring, it was also the month they celebrated the birth of their first child, Courtney — the delight of their life.

But for the Trempes and their family, April has become a month filled with dates difficult to bear.

This month marks the first anniversary of their daughter's death.

The bright-eyed Stouffville child, described as a friendly girl who was always positive, always smiling, died April 29 last year after being bitten in the neck by a dog.

Courtney would have celebrated her ninth birthday next Sunday.

And on April 27, the inquest into her death will begin at the East Gwillimbury town hall, where, for at least two weeks, a coroner's jury of five will try to determine how to prevent another such tragedy from occurring ever again.

"It's been a very difficult time for them," said the family's lawyer, Christine Zablocki, who will represent their interests at the inquest.

She said Easter was particularly difficult.

"Courtney was a very loved child — not only by her family, but by the community."

Courtney's teacher, for instance, remembered her as "the sunshine of our classroom" — a child who was artistic and loved to read.

Courtney's life ended when she was attacked by a bull mastiff in the back yard of the dog's owners, Todd and Kelli Reybroek, where the eight-year-old and two friends were playing.

One of the children had asked if the dog could come outside to play. When the homeowner opened the door, the dog suddenly bolted toward Courtney, lunging at her throat.

Kelli Reybroek, who was eight months pregnant at the time, struggled to pull the dog off Courtney. The little girl had bled to death by the time she arrived at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Since their daughter's death, Donna and John Trempe, together with their five-year-old son Carson, have wrestled with their grief in private, declining media interviews.

But the family did push hard for



Courtney Trempe and her younger brother Carson

an inquest. Although the process may prove painful at times, Zablocki says the ultimate goal will be to help protect other children.

"The family hopes this inquest will provide the answers to the many questions they have had about the tragic death of their daughter Courtney," she said. "When it's over, they hope recommendations will result in changes in law."

No charges were laid following Courtney's death, but the owners agreed to have the dog put down by regional health officials two weeks after the attack.

Zablocki said the inquest will take a serious look at dog ownership and may result in greater responsibility being placed on owners.

"When not properly dealt with, it can result in tragic deaths like Courtney's," she said. "Owners of potentially dangerous dogs may require specific requirements, such as keeping them confined."

Eleven days have been set aside for the inquest, which will be presided over by coroner Dr. Barry McLellan. Crown attorney Mary Lou Dickie will serve as the coroner's counsel.

York Regional Police Det. Frank Taylor has been assembling information on the case and said the inquest will not only deal with the events of that day, but also expand to look at various dog breeds, training and behaviour.

It is expected that numerous dog specialists will be called to testify, including Dr. Pamela Reid, an animal behaviourist from the University of Guelph.

Although banning of certain dog breeds has been dealt with elsewhere, Zablocki said the family is not pursuing that angle.

"I'm not, nor is the family, suggesting that is appropriate here," she said.

Zablocki said the inquest will

examine current laws governing domestic animals, including the Dog Owner Liability Act, which allows charges to be laid when a dog bites a person. The act was not enforced in Courtney's case, but Zablocki declined comment on why charges were not pursued.

Municipalities can also write their own restrictive bylaws, as Kitchener did when it banned pit bulls in 1997. Other towns and cities have similar restrictions.

However, the head of Kitchener's Humane Society, Dr. Gerhard Hess, does not advocate using laws to go after every dog with a pattern of violent behaviour.

"I don't think I would want to ban breeds indiscriminately," he said. "There should be a way of getting at the owner to control the dog."

Aurora dog groomer Racine Hyatt agreed. The owner of DogWorks said breeders, shelters and pet stores are all responsible for selling and adopting animals who have not been tested for their tempers.

"If you were to take a look at the dog industry, it is probably the most unregulated in the country," said Hyatt, who is a cousin to Donna Trempe.

Hyatt hopes the inquest won't focus too long on what happened that tragic day last April, but rather the real problem of dog behaviour and the owners who fail to train their pets.

"When we train dogs, we forget they are dogs," said Hyatt, who believes it is people, not the dogs, who create poor behaviour through bad breeding, lack of training and ill treatment. "There has to be more education."

Hyatt also believes the Canadian Kennel Club should place limits on breeders.

"If the industry can't provide the public with a properly bred, stable dog, who is going to?"

Dog owners should also provide incentives to properly train their pets, Hyatt said, such as offering a discount on dog licences if it can be shown the dog has had obedience training or a certified evaluation of its temper.

Restrictions should also be placed on the cross-breeding of certain dogs.

"If anyone learns anything from this, it should be that people have to have a trainable dog to have a dependable dog," she said.

## A mom's tribute

COURTNEY NICOLE TREMPE  
APRIL 18, 1990

*Please God, remember,  
today is a special birthday*

*Please God, remember,  
the pain does not go away*

*I think of you, my angel,  
every minute, every day*

*I wish, oh how I wish, you  
had not been taken away.*

*Your dimples, your sparkling  
eyes, saying 'I'm okay'*

*Your whistling and constant  
chatter, your innocent way*

*Your dad and brother miss  
you so, each and every day*

*You should be here, to  
celebrate, your 9th birthday.*

*You should be here to laugh  
and smile, in your unique way*

*I would hug you and kiss you,  
and watch you as you play*

*You should be here, my little  
girl, to celebrate this day*

*Courtney, today is your very  
special 9th birthday.*

Love Mommy.

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