‘It’s biting me!’ Teen recounts terrifying cougar attack

Cat was declawed and supposedly tame — but it pounced and bit her skull

By Mike Celizic
TODAY contributor

Amanda Gomez has always wanted to work with big cats. Now the 16-year-old South Florida girl has some advice, gleaned from bitter experience, for anyone who wants to pal around with the big animals: Even if they’ve been declawed, they still have teeth.

“Be more wary of animals that are trained,” Amanda told TODAY’s Matt Lauer Monday in New York, nine days after she was mauled by a 150-pound cougar that, she had been told, was tame and friendly.

Amanda reached back to the left side of her head to feel the 23 staples that surgeons had to use to put her scalp back together after the attack. In a prerecorded interview, she also showed NBC News puncture wounds on her thigh, side and shoulder, in addition to the neat row of metal running from near the crown of her head down to her neck.

Fortunately, she told Lauer, she’s feeling fine now. “This Friday I get my staples out, so it will be a lot better.”

Invitation to danger
On Saturday, Nov. 15, Amanda and her mother, Valerie Gomez, had been invited to a private home in Dade County whose owner had a permit to keep various wild animals, including two cougars. The invitation had come from 21-year-old Anthony Zitnick, whom Valerie had met the
day before. Zitnick told Valerie that Amanda could volunteer to help clean out cages at the home.

In Florida, high school students are required to perform community service before graduating, and Amanda, a junior, saw the invitation as a way to perform her service while doing something she wanted to do professionally when she grew up. She and her mother eagerly accepted the invitation.

What they didn’t know was that Zitnick was not authorized to be in the house alone, or to work with the animals without supervision. So they sensed nothing unusual when he took them into the house and entered a large cage that held a 4-year-old male cougar named Chaos.

The big cat, which had been declawed, rubbed against Zitnick and seemed completely tame. Zitnick put a leash on the animal and led it out of the cage. He asked if Amanda wanted to get a picture with the animal and she readily agreed. What happened next isn’t completely clear.

Unleashing Chaos
“It happened really fast,” Amanda told Lauer. “I don’t know if it tripped me or what.”

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Though declawed and supposedly tame, Chaos, a 150-pound cougar, pounced on Amanda Gomez. What she does know is that she somehow fell onto the ground, and the aptly named Chaos sunk his teeth into her thigh.
“It’s biting me,” Amanda told her mother and Zitnick. “It’s biting me!”

The cougar then bit her side and sank its fangs in her shoulder to the bone before taking her head in its lethal jaws.

“She actually was brave and really calm, considering he had hold of her and she couldn’t get loose,” Valerie said of her daughter, who never screamed or cried — although her report about being bitten was delivered at increasing volume as the cat worked its way up to her head.

Valerie Gomez wasn’t nearly as calm. She and Zitnick hit the cat. Valerie grabbed its jaws, putting her fingers in its mouth in her effort to get Chaos to let go. As the mother fought to save her daughter, she was yelling out loud and praying inside.

“I prayed to the Lord, ‘We need your help,’ ” the mother told NBC News. “And he answered the prayer.”

‘You’re beautiful’  
The answer came in the form of a neighbor who heard the commotion and leapt the fence separating his property from the scene of the attack. When he started slugging Chaos in the head, the cougar finally let go of Amanda. As it did, it pulled at her long hair, which was still entangled in the big cat’s teeth.

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Surgeons used 23 staples to put Amanda Gomez’s scalp back together. Valerie quickly took stock of her daughter. “I could see her hair was red, so I knew she was injured,” she told Lauer.
It was only when she was being put in an ambulance that Amanda finally started to feel the pain from her injuries and began to cry. Her mother said her daughter’s biggest concern was that Chaos had torn her face apart and she would be scarred for life.

“She didn’t realize her face was untouched,” Valerie said. “In the ambulance, she was saying, ‘I’m not going to be pretty anymore.’ I kept reassuring her, ‘You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful.’”

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The cougar first sank its teeth into Amanda’s thigh.
At a local hospital, surgeons needed two hours to carefully clean Amanda’s wounds and then patch the puncture holes and staple her scalp back together.

Police also responded, and arrested Zitnick on charges of burglarizing an occupied home. Animal control officers confirmed that the owner of the house, identified by The Miami Herald as Alan Rigerman, a retired Miami-Dade science teacher, had an up-to-date permit to keep cougars and other wild animals in his house, whose facilities had been given a clean bill of health just days before the attack.

As for Amanda, with her wounds healing, she still thinks about working with animals when she grows up. She may even work with big cats — but cougars are off her list.

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