



Contributed photo

Thomas' father and a friend returned to spot of the attack and found the remains of the bear had been picked apart by scavengers.

BEAR: Thomas does not plan to quit hunting

Continued from 1A

"I just love the mountains, and the thrill of being out there," he said. "I love to get up close and personal with the animals."

But even he admits this encounter was a little too close. Thomas' girlfriend, Lacey Caldera, fights back tears as he tells the harrowing story of his trip into the Grande Ronde Valley. Spring season for hunting bears is April 15 through May 31 in the Starkey Unit outside La Grande, and Thomas had gone out by himself to fill his tag.

Thomas parked near Tony Vey Meadows and ventured into the woods from there. That's as specific as he'll get about his exact location. The entire area is thick with timber, so Thomas used a predator call to lure bears into the open where he could take a shot.

Morning turned to afternoon before an adult male, maybe five and a half feet long, sauntered out within range. Thomas pulled the trigger and hit the bear in its shoulder, which startled it and sent it bolting downhill. Thomas followed, grabbing his pack and rifle, to look for the body.

After zig-zagging around trees for about a hundred yards, Thomas said he looked up and was bum-rushed. The bear grabbed him by his right arm and pulled him down before he could even take the safety off his gun.

"I'm just kicking and punching as hard as I can," he said. "It grabbed me by my left leg, and picked me up and started shaking."

Thomas tried forcing the bear's head down long enough to grab his semi-automatic pistol. The bear bit him numerous times on both legs, shredding the front of his pants. Fortunately, he said the shin-high boots he was wearing kept him from possibly breaking his ankles.

Finally, Thomas said he was able to kick the bear hard enough to knock him back and grab the pistol. Just as the bear went for his leg again, he fired two shots: the first did nothing, but the second pierced the animal's gut and forced it to retreat.

Battered and bloodied, Thomas got to his feet and scrambled back to the top of the ridge where he could use his cellphone, which still worked despite being damaged.

"I knew I had to get out of there while I still could," he said. "Once the adrenaline wears off, sometimes you just fall in a pile."

With blood now pouring out of his legs, Thomas managed to call his step-mother and friend back in Pendleton to tell them what happened. They both called 9-1-1 as Thomas hiked a mile back to his utility vehicle and drove another seven miles back to his truck.

Thomas actually passed the Union County sheriff's deputy and an ambulance on the highway, which were on their way to look for him. They checked his vitals on the road, and allowed him to follow them back to Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande.

Meanwhile, Caldera said she had no idea if her boyfriend was safe or even alive until two hours later.

"I don't know if my heart's ever going to go back to normal," she said. "I'm just glad to be able to hold his hand."

"It's times like this I'm glad he's stubborn," she added with a chuckle.

Bear attacks are extremely rare in Oregon. Wildlife officials say it's only happened four other times,

"I don't blame the bear at all. The bear was fighting for its life, just like I was."

— **Shane Thomas,**
Pendleton hunter

and none have been fatal. Two such cases came under similar circumstances, where a wounded bear retaliated against a hunter.

"I don't blame the bear at all," Thomas said. "The bear was fighting for its life, just like I was."

Doctors at the hospital pumped Thomas full of antibiotics and cleaned his wounds to avoid an infection. Thomas said he's still sore a week later, and walks with a bit of a limp. He later learned the bear bit down just an inch away from the main arteries on both his thighs, which could have killed him.

Despite this, Thomas said he has no intention of quitting hunting — though he said Caldera made him promise to hunt with a partner next bear season. He said he plans to be back at work next week.

"I feel pretty dang good, considering the fact," he said. "I'll be a lot more cautious when I go to retrieve my next bear."

As for the bear, Thomas said his father and a friend returned to the site and found the animal, which had managed to crawl about 400 yards before it died. They packed up the skull and paws for Thomas to keep as a reminder of the experience.

"I was lucky, obviously," he said. "But I'll be back up there again next year, doing the exact same thing."

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DISTRACTED: 58 fatalities from 2010-14 in Oregon

Continued from 1A

Oregon State Police investigated and determined Alexxys was using her smartphone throughout her trip. Shannon, 42, now is raising awareness of the dangers of distracted driving.

"This is my new project," she said. "I don't want any other family to have to go through this."

Shannon was at her apartment in Richland, Washington, plowing through loads of laundry. She had not had a night off in two weeks, she said, when she got a text message from her boss.

Both mother and daughter worked at the Tri-Cities Residential Services in Kennewick, Shannon as a counselor and Alexxys as a caregiver, helping people with disabilities improve their social skills.

Shannon said only a few people at work knew Alexxys was her daughter, and the supervisor was texting to ask if they were related.

Shannon said she suspected Alexxys missed work, maybe even quit. After all, she was still a teen.

While talking to her boss, she received a voice mail from a police officer. When she called back, the officer asked to verify her address.

Less than 15 minutes later, a police car arrived. Then a second. And then a third car, and out stepped the county coroner.

"I knew at that point there was not good news coming," she said.

She figured her father, Rick Moulton of Hermiston, had died. He is the brother-in-law of Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston. That makes Shannon his niece through marriage.

She said a Richland police officer asked to talk with her inside her apartment. She pushed back and wanted to know why they were at her home.

"They told me Alexxys was in a car accident and was killed at the scene," she said.

Oregon State Police used Alexxys's phone records to determine a time line leading up to the fatal crash. Lt. Mike Turner, commander of the Pendleton office, said based on the records and

driving time, Alexxys never stopped the car when she handled the phone.

"Everywhere she had coverage, she was texting, sending and receiving texts, taking calls, sharing and reviewing Facebook pages," Turner said.

Six minutes before the crash, she shared a post on Facebook, he said, and one witness reported Alexxys was on the phone as she left her lane.

"We don't know she was on her phone at the moment of the crash," Turner emphasized, "but she was certainly distracted from the roadway and not paying attention, and that led to her crash and death."

The Oregon Department of Transportation defines distractions as "anything that diverts your attention away from focusing on your primary task — operating your vehicle — and responding to what is going on around you." The agency considers distracted driving an epidemic in Oregon.

From 2010-14 in Oregon, according to the department, distracted driving resulted in 16,987 crashes with 14,186 injuries and 58 fatalities.

Drivers reported to be using a cellphone at the time of the crash caused 1,419 of those wrecks with 1,175 injuries and 15 fatalities. Drivers 16 to 18 account for 131 crashes in that subset, which resulted in 120 injuries but no deaths.

Convictions in Oregon for distracted driving during the same period totaled 88,626. The transportation department contends there should be more, but the distracted driving law, Oregon Revised Statue 811.507, does not take into account how people are using modern technology while driving.

The law prohibits drivers from communicating on a hand-held device while driving, but the law says

nothing about using a smartphone to listen to music, for example, or as a navigation system or to check social media. The Court of Appeals of Oregon on Aug. 19, 2015, ruled a state trooper did not have probable cause to pull over a driver after seeing her look down at a mobile device in her hand because he never saw her "put the device up to her ear, move her lips as if she were talking, or push any buttons." The appeals court found the state law applies only to "use of a mobile communication device for the purpose of voice or text communication."

Merely looking down at a mobile device, according to the appeals court, does not violate the law. Offenders in court then, according to ODOT, can claim they used the phone as a music device and avoid legal consequences.

The new speed limit on Interstate 84 in Eastern Oregon and on some other state roads is 70 mph. Cars at that speed cover almost 103 feet in one second. The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute in 2009 found drivers who text take their eyes off the road 4.6-seconds over a six-second interval.

Shannon said while Alexxys was not living with her at the time, she has not changed her daughter's room. She said she sometimes expects a call from her or to see her at home.

She also has helped her other daughter understand the loss. Ashlynn Therwanger, 21, is autistic and lives in Hayden Lake, Idaho. Shannon said she wanted a way for Ashlynn to remember her sister.

"I told her she has a guardian angel who now lives in her heart," Shannon said, "and we protect our heart."

They talk about once a week, and Ashlynn brings up Alexxys each time. And each time, Shannon

said, she tells Ashlynn her sister is in her heart. Then she asks, "What do we do?"

Ashlynn answers, "We protect our heart."

Shannon also hears from Alexxys's friends who ask if they can stop and visit.

"It's fun hearing the stories from her friends," she said, "but it's hard, too."

Shannon divorced from the girls' father, Bobby Therwanger, of Lubbock, Texas, less than a year after giving birth to Alexxys. But in March 2015 he reached out to Alexxys, and she grew curious. Shannon said that her daughter then flew to Texas a year ago to meet her father. After that, they stayed in touch about every over week.

Shannon said it was good they were rebuilding their relationship. She said she cherishes every memory she has of Alexxys.

Shannon was in Pendleton about two weeks ago to help the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Police make public service ads on the dangers of distracted driving. Alexxys's story is central to the campaign. Turner said those ads could start airing in the next week or so.

Shannon said since her daughter died, she has stopped messing with her phone when she drives, and she sees it everywhere she goes. She said she gets on relatives, friends and co-workers who do it.

"Just pull over if it's that important," she said. A few seconds of distraction can change your whole world, she said, and her daughters were her world.

"... My world kind of crashed," Shannon said. "I have only half a world."

Saturday would have been Alexxys's 20th birthday.

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