

Steve Willeford Claims He Is Not a Hero

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By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—On Dec. 2 and 3, 2017, I had the opportunity to visit Sutherland Springs, Texas, and to interact with the South Texas residents who are dealing with a church shooting that occurred on Nov. 5.

The trip occurred because of my friendship with Terry and Judy Post of the South Texas Church of God. Terry, who pastors our sister congregation there, has regularly expressed an interest in my traveling there as a guest speaker.

Therefore, my plan was simple. Speak at a Church of God congregation on Saturday, Dec. 2, and visit the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs on Sunday, Dec. 3, with the hope of doing some good.

Listening to hurts

On Saturday, I gave two presentations (which included interactive discussions afterwards) with the intent to discuss concepts to help people who are going through traumatic events.

Of course, one of the most basic principles of helping people going through trauma and suffering is to listen and let the suffering person determine the timing and the direction of the discussion.

Well, on Saturday evening I had the opportunity to attempt to help some people whom I had never met. Shortly after 6 p.m., Terry and I went to the small Baptist church in Sutherland Springs to see the temporary memorials and meet people.

At that time, I had the opportunity to meet people who, like myself, had come to visit the area and people who were relatives of the victims.

My evening was consumed by listening to a particular couple discuss the episode that took the lives of some relatives.

This husband and wife were some of the first people to arrive at the scene. They described the carnage and their efforts to help the seriously wounded.

It is possible that my listening to them (for hours) helped them. But it is definite that the sharing of their experience left a mark on my soul.

Meeting a hero

On Sunday, I went to an 11 a.m. service with Terry and Judy. Here are a few of my goals for that service:

- Meet a few people affected by the tragedy and listen to them if that's what they wanted.
- Hear how the pastor was nudging the people toward healing.
- Meet and shake the hand of Stephen Willeford, the man who shot and chased the murderer away from the church.

I did not expect to see Mr. Willeford at the church service (because I heard that he had temporarily left the area), but I hoped to.

After the church service, Terry pointed Steve out to me. I had the opportunity to talk with Steve.

Although I have much experience in interviewing people, I did not approach Steve from my journalistic experience. (I did not have a tape recorder and I did not have a note pad.)

He talked. I asked a few questions but did not press for more details. I thanked him for being a hero.

After we talked, I quickly wrote down my recollections of what he said. I want to share some with you.

- Steve does not consider himself a hero. "I am just a beat-up old plumber," he said.
- The Texas Rangers had nudged Steve out of town to avoid the deluge of media. (He does not know of any death threats toward him, as I had heard.)
- The murderer was protected by a vest and helmet. Steve didn't have shoes on.
- Steve had an AR 15 rifle. The murderer started with an AR 15 but also shot a pistol at Steve.
- When Steve first heard the shots, they initially sounded like tapping on a window. When he realized that a shooting was occurring, he went to get his gun and ammunition.
- Steve rushed toward the church yelling obscenities. ("I hope God will forgive me for that.") The murderer came out for him.
- Although Steve recognized the murderer was wearing a protective vest and helmet, he deliberately shot both the vest and the helmet. He knew that those items protected a person, but he also knew that those items did not stop the pain of bullets hitting them.
- As the murderer turned to get into his SUV, Steve aimed under the armpit (where the vest does not provide protection).

- The wounded murderer drove away. Steve and another man chased him in a vehicle.
- When the two men came upon him, Steve aimed his gun at him in the SUV and held him in that position for five minutes until police arrived.
- Once police arrived, an officer many yards away announced on a speaker for the person in the car to get out of the car. Because Steve did not want to be misidentified as an attacker, he stepped back and raised his hands. The officer on the speaker said, "Not you." Steve went back to aiming his weapon at the murderer.
- The murderer apparently killed himself.
- When Steve was shooting while at the church, he said he was asking God to cast out demons. He does not consider himself to be a hero, and he gives credit to the Holy Spirit.

He's a hero

Shortly after my discussion with Steve, I texted most of these same recollections to many of my friends.

I would like to share three of the responses I received.

- "Some said the 'beat-up ole plumber' was a hero. It sounds like they were right."
- "Steve is a hero. And a good shot. Most heroes don't think they are heroes. But they are."
- "He is a hero in our book. It would be an honor to meet him and listen to his story. With God's guidance he prevailed. It seems he demonstrated the ultimate act of love to voluntarily face evil and offer to lay down his life to save others."