



'GOD'S INTERVENTION'

**HERO WHO STOPPED TEXAS CHURCH SHOOTING CREDITS
PLANNING, TRAINING AND DIVINE ASSISTANCE**

SEAN CHAFFIN



A man on the far side of the sanctuary stood near two other men. Out of nowhere, he pulled out a shotgun and fired two shots. The blasts echoed through the church. Two men fell to the ground as congregants covered their ears, ducked behind pews and headed for the exit doors. As the assailant retreated toward the front of the sanctuary, a churchgoer drew a weapon, took aim and fired. The gunman fell to the ground as several other men moved toward him with weapons drawn. The entire incident lasted six seconds.

This was the horrific scene on Dec. 29, 2019, at the West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement, a suburb of Fort Worth, Texas. The church service was streamed live on YouTube, which captured the entire series of events. The video quickly went viral.

“Today, evil walked boldly among us,” Tarrant County Sheriff Bill Waybourn said at a news conference following the event. “But let me remind you, good people raised up and stopped it before it got worse.”

After several church shootings across the country over the last few years, West Freeway took security seriously and was prepared for just such an event. That preparation saved lives.

STOPPING A MURDERER

The man quickly firing to stop the shooter was Jack Wilson, a 71-year-old longtime firearms trainer and former contract negotiator for major defense companies. The father of three and grandfather of 10 has been married 51 years. He served six years in the Army National Guard and also six as a reserve deputy sheriff. After leaving his job in the defense world, Wilson opened an indoor firearms training center, ran that for 21 years and continues to conduct weapons training today.

PHOTO CREDIT: ASSOCIATED PRESS

STEPPING UP

Jack Wilson found himself called upon to stop an attack and preserve innocent life.

The shooter died from the gunshot wound. Authorities say the 43-year-old had a long criminal history in Texas, Oklahoma and New Jersey, including charges for assault, theft, arson and possession of an illegal weapon. His ex-wife told NBC5 in Dallas that he was “battling a demon” and was “not nice to anyone.”

On the day of the shooting, church security personnel was immediately suspicious of the man.

“It was obvious when he came in that he had on a wig and fake beard,” Wilson said. “In that area though, you have all kinds of people, dressed all kinds of ways. You can’t turn somebody away just because of how [he or she is] dressed.”

The man was greeted and welcomed like any other visitor, including a handshake. He sat on a back pew but left briefly to go to the restroom. About halfway through the service, he moved to the end of his pew. After speaking with security team member Richard White, 67, the man sat down briefly and then stood up and revealed the shotgun.

At that point, White and Wilson were drawing their guns, but the gunman was able to shoot and kill White and then Tony Wallace, 64, a deacon at the church. The gunman then turned and moved toward the front of the auditorium as churchgoers screamed and sought safety.

“I was trying to find a window to engage,” Wilson said. “I had people moving around in front of me, between him and me. At this point, I’m trying to get a clear shot to take, and I finally got a window and it was a head shot, which I teach not to do unless that’s all you have. Because of the commotion in front of me, that was pretty much all I had left.”

The gunman collapsed, firing a third shot as he fell. No one was struck. Several other security members had drawn their guns by this time and approached the fallen attacker to make sure all was safe.

Wilson’s successful shot came from about 15 yards away. He says he was able to make the difficult shot under trying circumstances as a result of “practice and training ... and more practice and training.” A devout Christian, he also

believes someone else was involved.

“Yes, I’ve trained and I’m a good shot, but there was definitely God’s intervention in there in my opinion,” Wilson said. “I hate that I lost two real good friends, but I don’t feel like I killed a human being. I took out evil.”

A PLAN IN PLACE

The security plans at West Freeway were anything but haphazardly assembled. West Freeway is located on the southwest side of Fort Worth, with a large homeless population in the area. The church has a mission of giving out food to and paying bills for those in need. But the area made many in the church feel precautions should be taken in case of an incident. Several churchgoers and leaders began planning about three years ago.

West Freeway security team members have undergone more than 300 hours of training — well beyond the four hours of classroom training and one hour of range training required for a concealed carry permit in Texas. The group meets frequently and discusses security plans. Individual members regularly practice shooting, including firing at moving targets. Members of the team attend every church service.

Numerous scenarios and reaction strategies are discussed among members. The church’s cameras can also be used to zero in on any potential problems, as they were with the attacker prior to the shooting on Dec. 29, 2019. Members were ready for almost anything.

The church’s congregation is a tight-knit group, with many families and relatives attending each Sunday. More than half of the church members are more than 60 years of age. If not for serious prevention efforts, many more of those members would have been killed in the attack. Authorities found 10 unused shotgun shells on the shooter’s body.

“Had there not been a church safety team there and had we not intervened, the outcome would have been significantly worse,” Wilson said. “And that’s not just my words, that’s an indication from the law enforcement community and from the governor’s office on down.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Wilson believes the shootings at West Freeway were a wake-up call for a lot of individuals. More churches, synagogues and other religious institutions are either adding armed security personnel or making use of volunteers. Many have reached out to Wilson for his advice and expertise.

“Since the event, I’ve been approached by a large number of churches from all over the country wanting to know how to set up a team,” Wilson said, “or churches that have security teams in-house at this time asking to evaluate their process[es] or explain what they’ve got or how to set one up.”

“People have come to the realization that they are responsible for their own safety, their own protection. That doesn’t mean we become vigilantes, and that’s one of the things I’m stressing. But you have to have some responsibility for taking care of yourself and your family.”

The event underscored that private citizens can successfully defend public spaces against armed invaders. As Wilson notes, the West Freeway security team members were all volunteers, and he was the only one with any prior law enforcement background. Detailed planning is the foundation of any good security plan.

“You have to prepare, you have to train, and you have to remain proficient in your capabilities,” Wilson said. “Shooting is one of those skills that, if you don’t maintain training, you’ll lose that ability.”

For Wilson, that day made one thing clear: License-to-carry laws can prevent evil acts. In the aftermath, many have reached out to him not only for training requests but also to let him know that the incident changed their minds on the issue.

RECOVERY AND REMEMBERING

In the wake of it all, there remains sadness at the West Freeway Church of Christ for the loss of two beloved members. The Texas Department of Public Safety’s Victim Services Unit offered help for those who witnessed the murders of White and Wallace and

those still dealing with the trauma of the attack.

"Some people are really struggling with the events, but all in all, the church is starting to heal some," Wilson said. "We did lose two extremely good men [who] were involved in the service at the church at all times. So there's a void there that cannot be refilled immediately, if ever."

Along with providing more firearms training, Wilson is running for county commissioner. His quick actions and straight shooting saved many lives, and although he may not view himself as a hero, many in Texas do. A quick scan of his campaign page on Facebook shows many comments offering thanks for stopping the gunman.

In January, Wilson was recognized by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott for his courage in the face of danger. He was awarded the Governor's Medal of Courage.

"When faced with an evil that few of us will ever comprehend, Jack Wil-

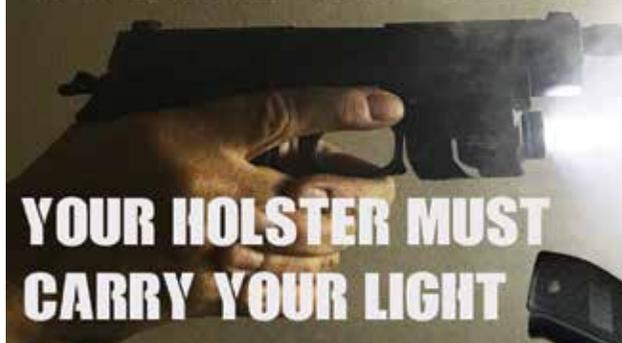
son responded with strength, bravery and with love for those in the church that day," Abbott noted. "The courage in his actions cannot be understated, and Jack is not only a hero to West Freeway Church of Christ, he is a hero to the entire state of Texas."

Ending someone's life, even someone in the midst of committing an evil and incomprehensible crime, requires some serious contemplation. Wilson understands those who might not want to be part of a church security team for that reason. In his case, Wilson knows he did what was right and is pleased he was there to help.

"I don't see myself as a hero. I see myself as a protector," Wilson said. "And that's how I'm approaching it. That's how I'm dealing with the fact that I had to shoot someone."



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