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Heroes Among Us

By
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The world was rocked several months ago when a student at Virginia Tech embarked on a murderous rampage on campus, taking the lives of more than 30 students and professors and destroying the lives of their families and those of so many others. We know these dozens of beautiful young people have been senselessly killed. We know that their opportunity to reach their potential was destroyed by this senseless massacre. We can only imagine what these wonderful young people would have contributed to our world, and as we mourn them, we also mourn the loss of their potential. Yet in the wake of the unspeakable madness surrounding this tragedy, the story of a true hero has been told. The actions of this one seemingly ordinary man on that date reminds us that we never know how high we are until we are called to rise.

I am haunted to this day by the story of Professor Liviu Librescu. He was an internationally renowned aeronautics engineer who had enjoyed an award-winning career. At the time of the rampage, he was a senior researcher, lecturer and beloved professor at Virginia Tech. He had been married to his loving wife for 42 years and was a devoted and respected father to his children. But he had known many hardships in his lifetime.

Professor Librescu was born in Romania 76 years ago. When Romania joined the Nazi forces during World War II, he was interned in a labor camp and later deported to a central ghetto with other Jews. While Romania's Nazi allied regime killed hundreds of thousands of Jews during the war, Professor Librescu survived the holocaust. He became a successful engineer in post-war Romania. Later, he began work at Romania's aerospace agency, which employment was threatened when he refused to swear allegiance to the regime. Later, he was fired when he requested permission to move to Israel. Ultimately, he did emigrate to Israel and, in 1984, he took what was to be a one-year sabbatical to Virginia where he stayed for the remainder of his lifetime. And for 20 years, he taught aeronautical engineering at Virginia Tech. It has been reported that he was the professor with the highest number of publications in Virginia Tech history.

And so on April 16, 2007, this extraordinary man was living a wonderfully ordinary life. His wife drove him to work that morning and an hour later he was dead. He had been engaged in class, when suddenly he and the students heard a thunderous sound coming from the classroom next door. When the students heard screaming, they realized the sounds were gunshots. Frantically, some students

began to get down on the ground. Others went to the door to see if they could get out, but there were gunshots in the hall so they retreated. As the students then ran toward the windows, Professor Librescu walked right to the door and blocked it with his body. His students were jumping out of the windows; the professor didn't budge. Despite his students pleas to leave with them, he just stood there, blocking the door. When one of the students tried to grab him to take him to safety, he pushed the student to the back of the room, out of harm's way and remained on guard while the other students leapt to safety. When the gunman finally got into the room, the professor and four students were still there. The four students survived, but Professor Librescu had been killed. He had saved the entire class with his humanity.

I'm sure when Professor Librescu's family learned of the circumstances of his death they were grief stricken, but not surprised by his acts. Clearly, those who knew him in life know that he had lived a hero's life all along.

Around this desperately sad time, more heroes were at work, but in a different venue. That same week, I was reading with admiration about the great work our esteemed member **Jim McElroy** was doing with Morris Dees down in Texas. As part of the Southern Poverty Law Center team, Jim was working pro bono to bring some measure of justice to Billy Ray Johnson, the victim of a vicious and racially-motivated hate crime. This poor mentally-slow Texas citizen was taunted, humiliated, beaten into a coma and left for dead by four young white men. He survived, but was left with significant and permanent brain damage. Billy Ray was further victimized again when three of the criminals who beat him were sentenced to only 30 days in the county jail and the fourth received only 60 days.

A Civil Complaint against two of the defendants was filed and down to Linden, Texas, went the Southern Poverty Law Center trial team. This small east Texas town had received nationwide attention following this heinous crime. The attention was in great measure due to the white criminal trial jury's refusal to convict some of the perpetrators of anything more than simple misdemeanors with recommendations they be sentenced to probation. While there were certainly many in Linden who felt sorry for what had happened to Billy Ray, many others felt sorry for the defendants and were essentially indifferent to the injuries inflicted on Billy Ray.

The trial lasted less than a week. The verdict, rendered in less than four hours, by 11 white jurors and one black juror was unanimous -- the defendants are liable for Billy Ray's injuries which are valued at \$9,000,000.

As the verdict was read, the lone black juror's arms and hands linked with those of the white juror next to her in a showing of the jury's solidarity in the fight against bigotry, hatred and injustice. In fact, immediately after the verdict, the tearful jury told reporters that they hoped "their verdict would send a loud and clear message that callous and inhumane treatment of any person regardless of color or station in life would not be tolerated." Clearly, the verdict was a measure of justice for Billy Ray. No matter how much of the verdict he collects, if any, the effort involved in obtaining this vindication for Billy Ray was heroic. The jury's courage in the face of the town's racial divide is cause for optimism and the jury's determination to send a message to its own community and the country gives further hope for a future that is more tolerant than today.

When I started this article, I thought that the similarities in the heroic actions of those involved were patent. As I end it, I'm not so certain. What I do know, is that one man, Professor Librescu, who witnessed and prevailed over the most inhumane intolerance on a massive scale, triumphed in life and in death, sacrificing himself to save his promising young students.

I believe that Jim McElroy, his team from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Linden, Texas civil jury and Billy Ray Johnson are heroes too. Their refusal to permit racial intolerance to leave Billy Ray without the chance for a better life and without any semblance of justice is heroic, perhaps in a different way. Their collective actions bring us all one step closer to a society in which all citizens, regardless of their race or station in life, have equal access to the courts and are free to live life to their fullest potential. I am proud to tell their stories.