

Making a Difference



By Genie Jennings,
Contributing Editor

When we lose a loved one, it is common to subject ourselves to self-examination of our personal relationship. In our grief we are able to rake up those instances when we could have been kinder or more sympathetic or simply less involved in our own wants and needs to provide for theirs. There is a dreadful period of remorse while we relive moments we cannot change; when we remake conversations substituting the words we should have said, and think of all the things we should have done. With time we can accept our shortcomings and forgive ourselves our trespasses. In time we find that the memories are warming and the pain can be borne. We can accept that death is part of life.

However, when a loved one is suddenly yanked from us we find an added burden. How could we have prevented the tragedy? What could we have done, or said that would have changed the moment? And, if our minds detect something

If Only... Nikki Goeser of Tennessee

that could have altered events, if we can think of something we should have done or said, if we can relive the moments that seem to have set terrible events into motion, then our loss is unbearable.



Nikki Goeser and her husband, Ben.

When I met Nikki Goeser, when I read the transcripts of her testimony and her emails to me describing the events on April 2, 2009, I was struck with her remorse. Nikki agonizes over the possibility of personally stopping the violence that robbed her of her husband, and permanently altered her life.

Ben and Nikki were living their own American Dream. They were young, energetic, vivacious. They enjoyed people. In addition to their daytime jobs, they created a “mo-

bile karaoke business” in downtown Nashville.

Nikki is a charming, attractive woman. And, she attracted the wrong man. This customer turned frequenting their shows into something close to stalking.

“He had sent me some inappropriate messages over myspace.com and I deleted him and blocked him but he kept coming to the karaoke shows I hosted...” Eventually, Ben had a talk with the man, insisting he leave her alone. “I thought he was awkward, odd, socially stunted and had a crush on me but he had never threatened me.”

It did not occur to the Goesers to get a restraining order. Nikki had a big strong man to protect her far better than a little piece of paper could. They performed in public settings. They thought they had handled the situation.

A normal man gets the hint when a woman is not interested in him. A normal man understands that when a woman deletes him from a social network it means she is really saying ‘no’ and not just being coy. A normal man listens and obeys when a husband tells him to leave his wife alone.

This was not a normal man. A month after Ben had told him not to bother Nikki anymore, he came to one last show at Jonny’s Sports Bar “...when I noticed him in the Sports Bar, I told Ben I did not

feel comfortable and I was going to have my stalker removed by management. Ben agreed..." She went to get the manager, then remained beside a brick wall where she could see but not be seen while the men in charge walked over to tell the offensive fan to leave. Ben, meanwhile, was busy loading more songs into the system for customers, and not paying attention to a situation he doubtless considered under control.

"When they approached him and asked him to leave, he pulled a .45 and came up behind Ben ...and shot (him) six times. Ben died instantly." The "... killer very calmly put the gun back in his jacket and started to walk away like he was going to just waltz right out without anyone knowing he was the shooter."

He was tackled and disarmed by a Marine in the audience. Several other men then piled onto the perpetrator. They held the assailant until the police arrived.

"Obviously you can see what it did to my life. I am now a widow with the last memories of my husband being that of brutality, horror and death (seeing him lying on a cold restaurant floor in a pool of his own blood)."

But, it did more than that to this young woman's life. Because she is left with heart-wrenching questions: could she have prevented or stopped this loss? If only I had had my gun. If only I had not stayed safely hidden. If only I had gone with the bouncers? If only I had been able to shoot him before he killed Ben? And of course, Would I have been able to shoot him before he killed Ben?"

Exactly a year earlier Nikki had gotten her concealed carry permit. Her husband gave her a Smith & Wesson .38 Airweight revolver.

The gun was locked in her car, because guns were not allowed in such establishments. So the widow lives with the torturous questions. "What could I have done?"

In the assailant's truck police "...found two more fully loaded guns, a shotgun and a rifle, binoculars, a baseball bat, gloves, rope and a knife." Nikki thinks she was another intended victim; that the only reason she is alive is because the assailant did not see her when she went to the back where she remained out of his vision during the attack.

The items in the truck might alternately suggest that the intent



Goeser with Ohio Gov. John Kasich at the bill signing ceremony for the Restaurant Carry Bill. Goeser testified twice on the bill and now has her sights set on similar legislation in North Carolina.

might have been to eliminate Ben and kidnap Nikki. We have heard of several cases throughout the country of victims being held for years by their obsessed abductors. There is no way of knowing whether he entered the bar with the idea of killing, or was planning to accost the couple after the show. I don't pretend to have any insight into the situation; I am merely offering another interpretation. One

that is at least as horrible.

Nikki was no stranger to firearms. "My father used to be involved in living history as a British Soldier (French & Indian War). I would watch him clean his long rifle guns when I was young." She learned to shoot with a Smith & Wesson .22 competition pistol when she was in her 20s. She had a concealed carry license. She had her gun in the car.

Could Nikki or someone else in Jonny's that night have prevented or stopped the fatal attack? Possibly. Certainly, if this had been a situation such as the one endured by Suzanna Hupp while her handgun was locked in her car because it was illegal to bring it inside the Texas diner. She watched as her parents were killed by a gunman who walked down the aisle shooting multiple victims. There would be time to prepare and defend at least oneself and the others in the booth. Just as there would be a chance in a typical school or mall mass shooting. Rather than cowering helplessly, waiting to become a victim, one could be ready to confront the shooter with one's own weapon when he arrived.

This was different. In this incident the gunman had a specific target. The action was entirely unexpected, and over quickly. There could have been someone in the audience both prepared and observant of the situation, but it is doubtful. According to Nikki, the gunman shot six times, put the gun back in his jacket and began to walk out before anyone reacted enough to tackle him. The staff had approached him and asked him to leave before the attack, and they were not able to move quickly enough.

Self-protection is much more

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involved than simply having and carrying a gun. Specialized training and practice is essential for the average person to develop the appropriate attitude. The shooting part is fairly simple at close range. Awareness of danger, the establishment and adherence to thresholds of escalating threat are necessary. One cannot deal with a perilous situation unless it is identified as such. Even though Nikki was uncomfortable with having the strange man in the room, neither she nor Ben considered him a threat.

Things would have been different, of course, if it had been legal to carry concealed weapons into the nightclub. Concealed weapon carriers are by training and habit more alert than the average person. One does not want the gun to be the first line of defense. One learns to be more observant, more cautious. It is doubtful that the killer would have been as willing to use his weapon if he thought there were others who might be able to counter his actions. Still, there is no way to know.

One thing we do know is that laws are for the law-abiding. Gun-free zones do not prevent the evil and the insane from bringing in firearms and explosives. They only prevent honest citizens from doing the same.

Another thing we know is that the police are not able to prevent crimes, only to investigate and, hopefully, bring perpetrators to justice. It is up to each of us to take care of ourselves, our loved ones and those around us. To do so we need the tools that make such actions possible.

One important way to do ensure that we have those tools is to work for appropriate laws and against harmful laws. Since that April night

in 2008, Nikki has devoted herself to fighting for the elimination of gun-free zones, particularly in restaurants.

She realized that both her work environments were "gun-free" which means only that they are self-protection free. In addition to the Thursday nights she and her husband ran their karaoke business in Jonny's, she was a financial advisor at a college. Neither allowed the honest to be armed.

She now works as a Legislative Assistant for the Tennessee House of Representatives, devoting herself to educating as many legislators as possible about the dangers of some forms of gun control. She lobbied in Tennessee for the Restaurant Carry Bill. It has become law. She testified twice in Ohio in favor of a similar bill. On June 30, 2011, Governor John Kasich invited her to attend the signing as the bill became law. Her next target for the bill is North Carolina.

Nikki Goeser is a powerful advocate for such legislation. Her story is compelling; a truly, senseless, heartbreaking event that brings tears to the back of your eyes even after multiple exposures. No young woman should go through what Nikki experienced.

She has managed to turn part of her grief into a crusade against some of the myriad stupid gun laws. We all are safer for her efforts.

The mother in me would offer one small comfort. While you should not have been prevented from having your gun with you, I believe with all my heart that things moved too quickly for you to have saved Ben. It does not change the reality of what has happened, but I pray you can lay down the burden of "If only ..." Rest in peace, Ben. And, peace to you, Nikki.

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