

W10 – Feature story writing

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Stopped for a Big Gulp, thwarted a robbery

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He walked into a Virginia Beach 7-Eleven for a Big Gulp. He ended up shooting 2 robbers, killing 1.

<https://www.pilotonline.com/news/crime/vp-nw-shooter-interview-20190829-ufii37kspbd63oymnqbdgpcqga-story.html>

It had already been a long and emotional day for the Virginia Beach man when he walked into a 7-Eleven store to buy a Big Gulp.

He'd just been involved in a heated argument with his stepfather, and police had been called to the house. After talking to officers, it took him more than an hour to walk back to his conversion van, which was parked near his work.

The vehicle wasn't working at the time, but he'd been living in it for a few weeks. Once he got there, he realized his canteen was empty.

"I said, 'Well, it looks like you're going to 7-Eleven.'"

When he arrived, the 37-year-old headed to the fountain drink machine, paying little attention to the din of chatter inside the South Newtown Road store. After pouring his favorite strawberry-melon flavored iced tea into a cup, he walked toward the cash register on the other side of the counter.

"I'm sipping on my Big Gulp, and this red beam cuts into my drink," said the man, who agreed to tell The Virginian-Pilot what happened July 25 on the condition he not be identified.

"I look down and I've got a pink drink with something orangish-red in there. Then I look up and there are two guys pretty much standing on top of each other with two guns pointed in my face."

The gunmen, on what police say was the last stop of a spate of robberies around 2 a.m. that Thursday, had hoods pulled over their heads and bandannas covering their faces. The red spot in the man's drink was a laser light from one of the guns aimed in his direction.

Still clutching his Big Gulp, the man followed orders to raise his hands and move to the side. Two other customers, a woman and a man, stood frozen in front of the cash register.

While one robber stuffed his pockets with money, the other leaned over the counter with his gun fixed on the store clerk.

"The clerk was arguing with them, saying, 'You don't have to do this. Just leave,'" the man said. "The situation just started to escalate, and I was worried he was going to shoot the clerk."

Robber shot and killed by bystander at 7-Eleven in Virginia Beach, police say »

While the robbers focused on the cash and the clerk, the man touched the 9 mm handgun hidden in a holster under his T-shirt with his pinkie. No one noticed. He knew he had about 10 rounds in the clip.

As he stood there, still clutching his Big Gulp and occasionally taking a sip, the man now found himself facing a tough decision: Should he draw the gun?

He ran through the possible consequences: Will I go to jail? Do I have a clear enough shot that no one else will get hurt? Is anyone else in the store? Will someone else pop in? If I don't do it, is the clerk or someone else going to get shot?

"I'm thinking about all of that and at the same time thinking, you're supposed to have the right to bear arms, the right to protect yourself, the right to protect others if need be," he said.

"I'm like 'Man, you say you believe in the Second Amendment. You say you believe in America. You know God's got you.'"

Still holding his drink in one hand, he fired first at the robber behind the counter. He aimed for his shoulder, he said, but ended up hitting him in the neck.

"He hollered, and I think that distracted (the other gunman) because he wasn't thinking that was going to happen," the man said. "Nobody thought that was going to happen. He's probably emotional and distraught because he was in control up to that point."

The robber behind the counter fell. The one who'd had his gun pointed at the clerk turned to see where the shot had come from. With that weapon now turned in his direction, the man fired two more shots. Both hit the second robber in his torso, killing him.

After kicking the gun away from the dead robber, the man told the clerk to call police, then checked on the one behind the counter to take his gun away and see if he needed first aid.

"He was like, 'How's my brother?'" the man said. "I remember answering him pretty coldly. I told him, 'You don't got a brother no more.'"

"He looked at me like he wanted to do something and I immediately lost it. I was like, '(Expletive), no one points a gun at me and gets away with it.'"

The woman at the register had dropped to the floor after the first shot was fired. She was still on the ground shaking uncontrollably, with her hands covering her head, when he went to help her up.

The man, a divorced father of a teenage son and an employee of a medical transport business, was also shaken but tried to remain calm.

He'd never shot anyone before.

He is, however, experienced with guns and has had a concealed handgun permit since he was 21. He enjoys going to a shooting range a couple of times a week and believes all gun owners should be properly trained.

As he waited for police to arrive that night, the man began to worry about how the officers would react.

"You just shot and killed somebody in 7-Eleven. You just told these people to call the cops and they're coming. You got to stand here and wait for them. Of course, you can't be standing here with a gun in your hand. You're a black man with a gun. You'll probably get shot."

He told the customers who'd been standing by the register to wait for police outside while he and the clerk stayed inside.

"I said to the clerk, 'Look man, I'm removing the ammunition from my gun,' and I made sure he knew where all the guns were.

"He was like, 'Man, you're my hero. You need a Gatorade or anything? Anytime you come in here, you're good.' And I was like, 'Thanks, but the cops are here now and we got to put our hands up.'"

The officers looked stunned as they surveyed the scene, he said. The man immediately recognized one of them: She'd been among the officers who came to his mother's and stepfather's house for the domestic disturbance hours earlier.

"She was about the third one to come around the corner, and her eyes got so big when she saw me," he said with a laugh. "I was just like, 'Look lady, I don't even know how to explain how I got here.'"

After telling the officers he was the shooter, the man was placed in handcuffs.

Barrie Engel, one of the customers who'd been standing at the register, said she implored the officers not to take him into custody.

"I was like, 'Don't arrest him. He just saved our lives,'" Engel said. "And they said, 'We have to do this.'"

The man was taken to a police station to answer questions. An officer drove him back to his van sometime after 7 a.m. Having gotten up for work at about 3:30 a.m. the day before, he had been up for more than 27 hours by then.

Prosecutors announced about a week after the incident that he would not be charged.

The man later learned the names of those he shot: The one who died was 18-year-old Michael Moore III, of Suffolk. The one who was shot in the neck and survived is Ronald Brookins Jr., also 18 and from Suffolk.

Brookins was charged in that robbery, as well as three others that occurred that night. Deric Simons, 19, of Chesapeake, whom police called an accomplice, also has been charged.

Both are being held without bond in the city jail. Brookins had enlisted in the Navy several months before the incident, and Simons was working at a Popeye's restaurant in Portsmouth.

Engel and the man met about a week after the incident, when he went to visit her restaurant, Coastal Cafe. He'd heard from a mutual friend that Engel was eager to meet him.

"As soon as I saw him I hugged him, and he hugged me for about five minutes," Engel said. "We both cried. I told him he was my hero, and he said he didn't feel much like a hero. He was still shaken up and trying to grasp it all."

Engel said that she — and many others — have repeatedly assured him that he did the right thing.

"It was a blessing that he was there at that time," she said. "It could have turned out a lot different. It could have been us that died."

The two have become close friends and have gotten together several times since their first meeting. Engel took him to a reggae show — the first concert he'd ever been to — and threw a birthday party for him earlier this month. She also sponsored a Facebook fundraiser for him, raising close to \$4,000.

"We're helping each other get through this," she said. "He knows I'm here if he needs someone to talk to, and I know he's there for me if I need someone to talk to."

The man has been using the money from the fundraiser to take care of some debts and "get his life together," Engel said. He used some to pay for driving school so that he can get his license, and for repairs so his van can pass inspection.

Once the vehicle is up and running, he hopes to do some traveling with his son. He also plans to continue living in it. He doesn't consider himself homeless, he said, it's a lifestyle choice.

While he's struggled with the fact that he killed a person — especially someone so young — he doesn't regret firing his gun that night.

"There's definitely an emotional cost to this," he said. "But I didn't get the choice of leaving. I didn't know what they were going to do. I was thinking, 'If you don't do this, you're going to end up with a scar either way, as well as all these other people. Somebody's going to lose either way.'"