

How one boy's tragic story inspired an entire police department

(<http://mejo457.web.unc.edu/2017/03/how-one-boys-tragic-story-inspired-an-entire-police-department/>)

Jacob was in his room upstairs when he heard arguing erupt outside. It was immediately followed by the sound of his mother screaming. Soon after, he heard gunshots and ran downstairs to his parent's room to see what was happening. His parents were lying on the ground in a pool of blood with their next-door neighbor standing over them gripping a gun. Jacob ran back to his room, grabbed an old cellphone, turned it on and dialed 9-1-1. He came down the stairs into the hallway as he saw his neighbor shoot again and turn his gun towards the house. Jacob stayed on the line with the dispatch officer as patrolmen rushed to the scene.

It was approaching 6 p.m. as senior police officer Carl Grecko was finishing his day at the South Asheville Resource Center. He was chatting with Andrew Barker, a new officer who had been on his own for about three weeks. Barker was just starting his shift when the shots-fired call came in on the radio. Dispatch called Barker to the scene, and Grecko joined Barker on the call. In the short drive, the call was continuously updated until the officers came upon the suspect: a man in a dark green shirt, overalls and a tan hat. Both officers exited their vehicles with their weapons drawn and pointed them at the shooter, who was still standing over the bodies.

"Get your hands up!" Grecko yelled. "I said put them up! Higher!"

"All right! All right," the suspect replied.

The officers ordered him to step away from the bodies, and lay face-down on his stomach so Barker could handcuff him.

"Where's the gun?" Grecko demanded.

"Over there, in that direction."

Still watching the suspect, Barker began to secure the scene, starting with the gun, while Grecko called for back-up. Grecko knelt down next to the victims, who had both been shot multiple times. Placing his hands on their shoulders, he said help is on the way, and asked them to hold on.

The call was updated again. There was a child in the house, and he had seen everything. By this time, the fire department and EMS had arrived on-scene. Barker stayed with the victims and the suspect, and Grecko went in the house to speak with the eyewitness.

"Are they okay?" Jacob asked. "Are mom and dad going to be okay?"

“I don’t know if they’re going to be okay, but we have help here and we’re going to do everything we can to try and help them,” Grecko replied. The neighbor had always been trouble, Jacob told the officer. His parents had constant arguments with him. It was difficult for Grecko to comfort him. He wanted to keep Jacob’s focus away from what was happening, but it had been years since Grecko was around young children. As more people arrived on the scene, the officer asked what Jacob’s name was and about his birthday.

Eventually, more officers entered the house with a chaplain, who relieved Grecko. By this time, the suspect had been taken away by another officer, and Grecko and Barker remained to recount their story to the commanding officers.

In September 2013, Jacob’s parents were killed after a long civil dispute lasting at least three years, according to neighbors. Jacob, who has asked to remain anonymous, was only 12-years-old at the time and this crime left him without a family. Many officers in the Asheville Police Department were touched by Jacob and his story, and were motivated into action in the days and weeks following the shooting.

Initial Interview

Jacob’s foster family led him into APD the day after he witnessed his parents’ death. He was taken to an interview room, where Sgt. Charles Wells and Detective Kevin Taylor waited to ask him about what had transpired.

“It was kind of scary to me. I’d never been questioned by law enforcement or anything like that,” Jacob said.

Though it was a nerve-wracking experience for him, Jacob recounted what he had seen because he understood the officers had a job to do. Throughout the interview, Taylor noticed immediately that Jacob was a unique young man.

“He had this sense of memory recollection,” Taylor said. “He was able to tell us prior incidents where his parents and the neighbor got into confrontations and he could give us specific dates and years when these confrontations occurred.”

Taylor said it is common for people to remember events like these, but not many could recall a specific date for each incident, especially as a 12-year-old.

Jacob continued with what he considered pertinent information. He told the detectives his family had lived in the house for four years and that it had recently been repossessed, but they were somehow able to keep living there.

Wells also noticed something special about Jacob. He was highly intelligent and very articulate for his age, expressing concern about upcoming bills and other household maintenance issues.

“He immediately struck me as being mature way beyond his years,” Wells said. “It was almost like he was the parent of his parents.”

Jacob knew bank account numbers, when bills were due and other household functions that Wells said were astounding for a 12-year old to know. Many officers began to wonder if Jacob had been forced to grow up too fast.

Throughout the rest interview, Taylor said Jacob was very respectful and provided clear and concise information, but he was very concerned about the whereabouts of his parents’ killer. “[Jacob] wanted to know is he in the room next door to me, is he in jail yet, is he going to see me? He was clearly fearful of his neighbor causing harm to him as well,” Taylor said.

The detectives tried to ease his concerns as they finished their questions, and offered their condolences at the interview’s conclusion. As Jacob left the department, some of the officers were moved to action on his behalf.

‘We had to do something’

As the investigation continued, detectives learned more about the life Jacob had been living before this incident. His home had been in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, surrounded by nice houses and landscaped yards, but the inside of his home didn’t match the exterior. Inside, the home was dirty and cluttered, and didn’t appear to have running water. Trash bags lined the toilets and leftover food filled the kitchen.

“We learned more about his upbringing, his home environment, and he never really had a childhood that you would expect a 12-year-old to have,” Taylor said. “After we interviewed him and found out more about him, we knew we had to do something.”

Wells started by reaching out to other agencies in the area, and other officers in the APD, including Detective Germaine Weaver. Weaver is a member of the Fraternal Order of Police, a fraternal organization of sworn law-enforcement officers. In 2013, he was a newly-elected second vice president for the Asheville branch of FOP. Wells asked if FOP would be able to help provide Jacob with necessities and Weaver took it to the board immediately.

“I called the board together and said ‘this is what the deal is: this kid has lost both of his parents.’ It didn’t take them long at all to say we’re not just going to help with necessities. We wanted to do something bigger for him,” Weaver said.

After a vote, the FOP board decided to donate \$1,000 to helping Jacob.

“It started with communication, reaching out to people within the agencies and saying ‘can you guys help?’ And it kept growing. It was touching to see everybody’s generosity,” Wells said. As donations continued to pour in, Target heard about the situation, and decided to match the FOP’s offer. Wells was touched by this generosity and began to plan a trip to Target with Jacob.

'A Red Schwinn Bicycle'

Two or three weeks after Jacob's interview at APD, he came back to the department and walked into a room filled with the donations and the officers who donated them.

"It was very considerate of everyone involved," Jacob said. "Overall, it was pretty generous of the entire department to do that for me."

Three officers accompanied him to Target and let him start shopping. He started with practical, smaller items because at the time he wasn't sure where the funds were coming from, and didn't want to take advantage of the officers' kindness. The officers began to point Jacob towards what Weaver called "the fun stuff." Eventually, Weaver said they were able to get him on a bike and Wells said it was an interesting experience.

"He picked out a bicycle and jumped on it," Wells said. "He took off not knowing how to ride it, and tore a rack of stuff down at Target."

Jacob said he was not good at riding a bike at that time. Generally, he could only ride for short distances because he wasn't good at balancing, he said.

"I remember it was a red Schwinn bicycle," Jacob said. "I remember thinking: I wonder if I'm going to be able to ride this bike."

Throughout the rest of the trip, Jacob got some more fun items, including a PlayStation 3. It was really important to the officers that Jacob had the opportunity to be a kid.

'We'd be there for him'

After Jacob received the donations from APD, the officers never saw him again. His parents' killer was charged with the crime, and Jacob was placed in a home with his mother's cousin. Though they never saw him again, many of the officers still think about Jacob and the effect he had on their lives.

"I've always wondered, occasionally, how he's turned out since then," Taylor said. "I hope he's in a much better environment."

Weaver remembers Jacob's attitude and how he made it through such a traumatic situation. "He was just a blessing. His whole attitude and demeanor about the whole situation just sticks out and it's one of those things that makes you come back the next day and do a better job at work," Weaver said.

Jacob is now almost 16-years-old, and still living with his mom's cousin. He is dual-enrolled at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, and hopes to graduate from high school with an associate's degree.

"I basically live the normal teenage life," Jacob said.

If he saw the officers again, Jacob said he'd like to thank them for both their generosity and how they handled such a rare and unfortunate case.

Wells said anyone should be willing to help someone who is less fortunate than them. In this case, Jacob was a victim who didn't ask to be put into that rough situation. Wells said he was happy to help Jacob in any way he could.

"Most of us do this job because we're called to do it. We don't do it for the paycheck, we do this because we want to help people," Wells said. "This was just an opportunity for us to go a little bit further than the normal call for service."