

My name is Stephen Willeford. Normally when I give a speech, or make a statement, it is about the importance of preparedness. After a shooting incident, it is customary for Police Officers to review what went right, and what went wrong. Today, I am here to tell you about what went wrong, and the consequences of those decisions. This is the hardest statement I will ever make.

I have led an unordinary, and yet incredibly blessed life. I live in a small town, about an hour outside of San Antonio, where my wife and I raised three kids. I grew up in the area. I know my neighbors. The town is safe, quaint, and comfortable.

I have been a gun owner all my life. I trained my kids how to handle firearms from a very young age. I am comfortable around firearms, and have extensive knowledge of them. I own a safe, and because I thought it was the responsible thing to do, I kept my rifles and handguns locked away. Because nothing bad happens in my town.

Until the day it did.

On November 5th, 2017, an evil and deranged man opened fire into the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, where 49 of my friends, community members, and neighbors were gathered to worship. This madman brought a vehicle full of firearms and ammunition that he obtained because the government failed to enforce its own pre-existing laws.

When shots tore through what should have been a peaceful Sunday morning, my daughter ran down the hall, and alerted me in my room. At first I didn't believe her, but upon further investigation, I recognized what I was hearing, and flew into action. I want everyone listening to take a moment to imagine themselves in this situation. Imagine yourself running down the hallway to your house, and fumbling with the lock on your safe. Imagine hearing each shot ringing through the air, knowing the damage that is being done. Knowing that one of your

community members is on the receiving end of that bullet. Knowing that you are not fast enough. I grabbed my AR-15, grabbed a handful of ammunition- eight bullets, I would later find out is all I could hold in my palm. I ran to my front door, loading the gun as I ran. My daughter met me in the living room.

In the time it took me to open my safe, and grab ammunition, my daughter had jumped in her car, driven up the block, witnessed the murderer in full tactical gear entering the church, and returned. How much time had that taken? I timed it. About 2 minutes.

I could have saved 90 seconds if my firearm had been loaded, and not locked behind a giant steel door. I timed that too. These moments were precious, and completely lost. 90 seconds does not sound like a lot. But to me, it will always be the longest seconds of my life, and my greatest regret.

The police officers in my town are some of the best. Our deputies, and officers did everything they could to respond to the active shooter in Sutherland Springs. But, as author Chris Bird wrote “When seconds count, police are only minutes away”. In our community, it was nineteen. It took nineteen minutes for the police to make it across the county to our town, after the first 911 call. Every second of that time counted. I was my community's first responder.

When my daughter came back from the church, and told me what she saw, I was in the living room, headed for the door. I didn't even pause to put on shoes. Each step I took, each yard I gained was too slow, and was time lost, as the gunfire continued. I screamed out as I drew closer, and the shooter heard me. My voice made him stop killing my neighbors, and face me.

Seconds before he heard me, he shot Kris Workman in the spine, paralyzing him from the waist down. If I had had my firearm ready, would this young husband and father still be able to walk today? I have never asked who was shot before Kris. I cannot bear to know.

To be brief, the massacre ended when the killer and I traded shots, and he fled. I pursued him down the highway, where he took his own life.

49 people went to church that morning. 26 didn't make it out alive, and not one person walked out of that church uninjured.

Firearms did not commit this atrocity. Don't get this story wrong. Evil did this. My firearm helped stop it in its tracks. But how much faster would I have been able to respond if I had my gun ready?

In contrast to my story, let me tell you about April Evans. April is a young mother from Virginia, married to a police officer. One night, when her husband was at work and April was home alone with their two year old daughter, a criminal began busting her door down. April had her gun. She called out to warn him, but he didn't stop as he burst into her house, and ran down the hall. April fired, brought him down in the hallway, and held him at gunpoint until the police arrived.

In these precious seconds, imagine if April had to fumble with a safe. Imagine if politicians had passed a law mandating what April was allowed to do in her own home. Would she have had time to open the safe, aim, and fire? Would she have had time to protect her daughter, and herself?

There are a lot of things that we can learn from April's story, and my own. First, is the importance of the Second Amendment, and our God given right to protect ourselves. Second, is the importance of preparedness. No one thinks that something like this can happen in their communities. But it can.

I will always be haunted by those 90 seconds wasted getting my gun from the safe and loading it.

I will never again keep my firearm unloaded in a safe. I will never again leave my family members, and my community vulnerable to the predations of criminals and madmen. Whether or not this law passes, I will not comply. I won't make that mistake again. It came at too high a cost.

It was a hard way to learn this lesson. An unjust way to learn this lesson. But a lesson learned nonetheless. The answer to our problems is not more restrictions. It's more education. It's an informed public. It's educating kids on gun safety from an early age.

Government stepping into an individual's home and dictating how they can act in each individual circumstance, legislating how they are allowed to defend themselves and keep their families safe- will not end well. We as individuals are responsible for the decisions we make in our own home. We have that right- not given to us by our government, but by our creator. Our government is there to protect and support that right, not legislate it. Each of you made that promise when you were sworn into **our office**. I urge you to back up that promise with your vote.

Since that day, I have spoken at a lot of different events on the importance of preparedness. People come up to me, and shake my hand, and thank me for doing what I did. I don't think it was anything special. I think a lot of people in my situation would have responded the same.

But they always ask me how many lives I think I saved that day. My answer is always the same: not nearly enough.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.