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Training is essential if you decide to carry

Guest columnist Jeff Myers of Memphis is a self-employed insurance agent.

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I'm a 43-year-old husband, a father and a self-employed insurance agent. I carry a handgun every day.

I applied for my first handgun carry permit in 1995, when I often worked late alone in my office and traveled around the city on evening appointments.



By Lance Murphey

Jeff Myers: "More than you can know, I hope I never have to draw, much less fire, the handgun I carry with me. At the same time, my training has given me the skills and confidence to use appropriate force effectively if it becomes necessary."

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I had no trouble meeting the requirements to obtain a permit from the Shelby County Sheriff's Department, which administered handgun licenses until the legislature turned that responsibility over to the state Department of Safety in 1996. But while I have hunted since the age of 12 and have enjoyed recreational sport shooting for most of my adult life, I quickly discovered that I was not adequately trained - mentally or physically - to carry safely and be prepared to use a handgun for self-defense.

Just as owning a grand piano doesn't make you a musician, owning a handgun doesn't guarantee proficiency in using it - particularly if your prospective target is likely to be another human being.

I decided to seek additional training in using firearms for self-defense, and that decision changed my life. The first course I enrolled in at Range Master confirmed my belief that I was unprepared to carry a weapon, and it helped me develop a mindset of being capable of defending myself and my loved ones against sudden violent assault. I've taken a number of other courses since then, and I plan to continue training to expand my firearms skills and keep them sharp.

I believe that my training has prevented me from becoming a victim of violent crime without - so far - having to use force. More than you can know, I hope I never have to draw, much less fire, the handgun I carry with me. At the same time, my training has given me the skills and confidence to use appropriate force effectively if it becomes necessary.

Criminals don't beam down to Earth from a mothership. They have to walk to you (or wait for you to walk to them) to get close enough to be a threat. The lesson is to pay attention to your environment and not let a strange person approach within contact distance. Yet one of the most common comments from assault victims is: "I never saw him."

A few years ago, a very aggressive panhandler approached me in a parking lot. Before he closed the distance between us, I took an aggressive stance, raised my hand, and told him to "stop" in a strong voice.

"I'm sorry, officer," he responded. "I didn't mean to bother you." No weapon needed to be used or even displayed; all I had to do to avoid a potential problem was to be aware of the situation and have a plan for action in case the panhandler turned out to be a threat.

Last summer, I was alone at the front desk in my office when a man entered in a brisk manner, talking rapidly and looking about the room. Expecting that something might develop, I got up from the desk and took an aggressive stance. The man suddenly began to back-pedal, just as a second man - who was wearing a long overcoat (in August) and had his right hand stuffed in the coat pocket - started to come inside.

Together, the two men stumbled back through the front door and into a car that was backed into a nearby parking space. They sped away, leaving me certain that if I hadn't been trained to react quickly and be prepared to defend myself, I'd have become a victim of robbery - or worse.

The decision to carry a gun is not one I take lightly. It carries questions and issues that I still find myself working through - many of them the same questions you might ask.

- Why try to fight criminals? You might get hurt or killed. Why not just give them what they want so they'll go away?

What kind of social contract is "I won't kill you if you'll give me what I want"? It places the outcome of a situation entirely in the criminal's hands, granting him (or them) ultimate power over my life or those of my loved ones. If we accept it, we surrender initiative and in essence vote to let ourselves become victims of violent crime.

- Why carry a pistol to defend yourself? Why not let law enforcement professionals do it for you?

Think of some notable violent crimes in recent Memphis history: A young woman is killed in an East Memphis mall parking garage; a prominent lawyer is murdered in a downtown garage; a fast-food restaurant employee is killed in her store in Germantown. They were all alone when they were unexpectedly confronted by a violent attacker.

Criminals do their best to commit their crimes when police are not present. If you're assaulted, you're likely to be alone, and you may face more than one attacker. The average duration of the typical violent encounter is less than two minutes. Compare this to the average police response time and you'll see that the chances of help arriving in time - even if you have a phone in your hand - are slim. It will probably be up to you, at least in the first critical moments, to deal with the situation by yourself.

- Why not just carry a pistol when you're going somewhere you think you might need it?

If you're going somewhere you think you might need a gun, don't go.

Violent crime can happen suddenly and unexpectedly, anywhere and anytime. You might think the chances of needing a pistol for self-defense are slim. But just like airbags, seatbelts, fire extinguishers and antibiotics, when the need for a handgun arises, that need is great indeed.

Accepting responsibility for protecting yourself against crime makes as much sense as routinely buckling your seatbelt to avoid serious injury in a traffic accident.

- Aren't you uncomfortable having firearms around your children?

When I don't have my pistol on my person, it is unloaded and secured in an area that is not accessible to my sons or their friends. If it is needed, I can load it in a second or two. My other firearms are locked away. I've taught my sons the rules of firearms safety and they understand those rules.

The decision to carry a handgun comes down to taking responsibility for my own safety. Whether I like it or not, the potential for violent assault exists in our world, and I know that I'm prepared to deal with it if necessary.

But the training that's required in Tennessee to obtain a handgun carry permit, in my opinion, is minimal. I'd encourage anyone who is thinking about making the same decision I did to seek training and instruction that go well beyond the Department of Safety's requirements. It's worth the time, it's worth the effort, and it may help you save your life someday.

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