REMEMBERING A TRUE HERO: FORREST L. WILLEY, MY UNCLE

- He made a difference!
- And he's still inspiring others toMAKE A DIFFERENCE!

By Stephen L. Bakke Manuary 24, 2014
Updated August 14, 2014



Greater love hath no man than this - that a man lay down his life for his friends. - John 15:13

Memories

We often think that bullying and school shootings are of recent vintage, but that's not the case! Every time I hear of a bullying investigation, or a school shooting, my mind goes back to the fall of 1966. I was in my third year at Luther College in Iowa and my cousin Bob Willey had just started his first year there. I was very pleased that Bob had decided to join me at Luther. In the years to follow, he became my good friend and fraternity brother. Bob was the son of Forrest Willey, the Secondary Education Coordinator in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. I have also become good friends with Forrest's younger son (Forrest) Leo "the 2nd." And daughter LuWanna and I frequently correspond.

One day in October 1966 I was told that Bob had rushed home from Luther College to northern Minnesota because his dad, my uncle, had been shot by a student at school.

The first picture below is part of the Willey family 3 years before this event. Uncle Forrest is on the far right with (Forrest) Leo Jr. next to him, then Wanda, Aunt Lucille, and Bob. The two older sisters, Rita and LuWanna, were already grown and raising their own families. The second much earlier family picture includes Rita and LuWanna (shorter) in the back row with Wanda in the middle.





October 5, 1966 - A man "makes a difference."

A 15 year old student approached the Grand Rapids Middle School with a loaded .22 caliber pistol. He shot and seriously wounded one of his intended targets, 14 year old Kevin Roth. Uncle Forrest

came to the scene, confronted the boy, and attempted to get the gun away from him before anyone else was shot. He was shot multiple times in the process and collapsed. The boy fled the school property and after firing a few shots at the police from behind a tree, finally surrendered his weapon to officer Harvey Dahline. Dahline, the arresting officer who would later be the Chief of Police, had armed himself by borrowing a shotgun from a state trooper. He recently recalled the end of this tragic event as the shooter finally surrendered:

I tried to walk towards him. I told him to put that gun down. You had to talk to him. He didn't say too much. He seemed to be bewildered.

The shooter was taken into custody, which would eventually result in repeated incarcerations and a reclusive life many years later. After the arrest, it became clear to Dahline that this was a kid who wanted to be known for something – even killing someone. Uncle Forrest died eight days later. **But he had made a difference** that day! Unfortunately the lives of his family would be forever changed.

The wounded boy, Kevin Roth, would recover from his severe physical injuries. He and others had teased the shooter and had become targets. According to Kevin Roth's account, the shooter even brought bullets to school the day before and said he was going to use them. Kevin remembers apologizing to Uncle Forrest as they lay on gurneys next to each other in the school.

Bravery honored!

Seldom, if ever, has an educator demonstrated so unselfishly his complete dedication to the welfare of his students as did Forrest Willey With no concern for his personal safety, he risked and gave up his own life to prevent the serious injury and possible death of young people in our district. – Resolution by the Grand Rapids School District, adopted on the day of Forrest Willey's funeral in October of 1966.

In addition, in 1968, Uncle Forrest was given a posthumous award by the Carnegie Hero Fund, based in Pittsburgh, PA, for his bravery. Here is the citation from that organization:

FORREST L. WILLEY Grand Rapids, Minnesota

Forrest L. Willey died attempting to save an indeterminate number of persons from being shot, Grand Rapids, Minnesota, October 5, 1966. A fifteen-year-old boy armed with a pistol went to the parking area of a high school and there shot another boy, who fled to a nearby building. Learning of the incident, Willey, 58, director of secondary education, emerged from his office into the parking area. The armed boy was pointed out to him. Willey remarked that he was going to try to get the gun before someone was killed. He walked toward the armed boy, who turned and faced him. Urging him to hand over the gun, Willey moved nearer. The boy fired the pistol. The bullet missed Willey, who continued forward. The boy fired two more shots. One of the bullets struck Willey, and he fell to the ground. Police arrived, and the armed boy fired the remaining bullets at them before surrendering. The boy who had been shot recovered, but Willey died.

A lady sets out to refresh the fading memories!

An episode like this, unfortunately but predictably, is too easily pushed into the background and forgotten by a small community. 47 years later, Rachel Bledsoe identified with the events that had happened so long ago, and set out to raise the awareness of Forrest Willey, so much a hero many years before, and in so doing set the stage for a committed fight against bullying. She stated:

Our parents and our educators need to realize that this was the ultimate sacrifice somebody made, and we don't want to rewrite history. We want to learn from our past.

Rachel also emphasizes that the student who shot and killed Forrest Willey isn't simply a murderer – he did a terrible thing but it happened in the context of relentless teasing and bullying, in addition to a difficult home life. So **she decided to make a difference** by refreshing the memories of the local hero, and at the same time raise the awareness of an ongoing problem of bullying.

Rachel is a dedicated parent of a "bullied" highly-functioning autistic 11 year old. She seems to feel the "shooter's" pain through witnessing her son's pain. This project got its start when she experienced extreme frustration when her warnings and requests for help with eliminating the bullying seemed to make very little difference. She became aware of the heroism of Forrest Willey many years before from her mother. She also wrote a report on the event for a college class. For years she was surprised at the lack of local knowledge or memory of the event. But **she was going to make a difference** and refresh the memories while helping her son.

She raised funds for the Willey Memorial and the bullying project through "Bullying – Be the Solution, Not the Problem" and by collecting donations through the Grand Rapids State Bank. The memorial bench was installed outside of Elkington Middle School and dedicated in October of 2013.





Inscriptions on the memorial black granite bench: FRONT – "HE MADE A DIFFERENCE!" In memory of his dedication – Mr. Forrest Leo Willey – ISD 318 Coordinator of Secondary Education 1959 – 1966; BACK – MR. FORREST LEO WILLEY – January 24, 1908—October 13, 1966 – Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his own life for his friends – John 15:13 – October 5th 1966 – Mr. Willey sustained fatal wounds in a school shooting while protecting students – He left behind a wife and five children – Dear Mr. Willey, Your dedication to your students is revered by this community – Rest in peace until we meet again..





From the left: Retired Grand Rapids Police Chief Harvey Dahline (arresting officer), Kevin Roth, Forrest Leo Willey Jr., retired State Patrol officer Lloyd Olsen, "Be the Solution" Founder Rachel Bledsoe, and Rachel's son Nathaniel Burdick

Click HERE for a video of one of the October 2013 dedication events!

Uncle Forrest

Forrest Willey was born in Calvin, North Dakota. He was the class salutatorian in high school and received a BA in 1930 from North Dakota State. He received a Masters' Degree from the University of Minnesota in 1945, about a year before I was born. **Today, January 24, 2014 is the 106th anniversary of his birth!**

I remember my Uncle Forrest vividly. He was a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact, actions have consequences, kind of guy. He had a wonderful, quiet, yet immense presence. He was my baptismal sponsor - my Godfather! Here is the only picture I have which includes both of us. It's from 1946, or early 1947, and I'm the baby with Uncle Forrest in back looking at me over my mother Dorothy's shoulder. Aunt Lucille is just to the right of me and cousin LuWanna is looking down at me from behind. My dad Lewis (Lewy) is holding one of the other girls in the picture who were from a neighbor family. Uncle Forrest made a difference in my life too! Why? Because even now I hear and read about how he made a difference in people's lives. And because I still personally recall who he was and what he did! I really have thought often about Uncle Forrest!



Update as of August 15, 2014

Memorial to Fallen Educators - remembering, recognition and inspiration continues!

On June 12, 2014 a Memorial to Fallen Educators was dedicated at its new location on the campus of Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. This impressive memorial is part of the National Teachers Hall of Fame which is part of this well known "teachers' university." Forrest Willey and 112 other "fallen educators" were honored and remembered by the ceremony that day, and the impressive monument will be a reminder to Americans for decades to come.





HERE is a link to the Hall of Fame Website. HERE is a link to the website for the memorial. Click HERE for a link to the first half of the Fallen Educator Memorial Service which took place inside the museum building. Click HERE for a link to the dedication portion of the Service which took place outside at the memorial.

Forrest Willey was an inspiration to his family!

Bob Willey, one of Forrest's 5 children, recalled his father's inspiration in an email to me about 6 months ago. Here is a portion of that email:

I dedicated my entire 42 year career in public education to my Dad and have done various presentations about him Dad firmly believed in the beauty inside every student and that each one was important and should be accepted. He instilled that belief in us. That has been my main mission in my career.





Inspired by his father, Bob definitely made a difference! Sadly, Bob's life was cut short when he died just two weeks ago, July 31, 2014, at the age of 66. In recent months he was diagnosed with cancer and then experienced a severe stroke. His memorial service was last Friday, August 8, 2014, at Two Rivers Park in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. He is survived by wife Michele, and daughters Cassidy (husband Eric) and Betsy. Also surviving are all four of his siblings: Rita, LuWanna, Wanda, and Leo.