

Forever Changed

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This is a story that I tell repeatedly and each time I tell it I learn something new, something about myself I never knew existed inside of me or inside of my family!

January 6th, 2015, a regular day of sorts as it started out. I woke up, helped my wife get the kids dressed and off to school. I had taken her vehicle to get the oil changed and was going to clean it up before I headed off to work. As I spoke to my wife we had made plans to meet for lunch that day. Meeting for lunch was a rarity, as it seemed most of my days lately had been spent at work.

I worked for Pampa Police Department, in scenic Pampa, TX. Pampa is a small town of about 20,000 population, located in the Texas Panhandle. At the time I was appointed as the evening shift patrol sergeant but had spent plenty of days and nights covering for our shortage of 5 officers. To give you perspective, in the department we were supposed have 31 sworn personnel, with 15 in patrol, 10 in our detective division, 2 in traffic, and 4 as our command staff. So being 5 officers short was catastrophic.

Around 9:30 a.m. I got a call from the day shift sergeant, asking me for someone to come in and help cover. It had been a particularly busy Tuesday morning and he needed help. Knowing that two of my officers had stayed over till 3 a.m. to cover the midnight shift, I told him I would be in. after the conversation I called my wife Jessica, and told her lunch would have to be cancelled, I had gotten called in. She wasn't upset and knew that it was normal for that to happen. I told her I loved her and said I would call her later.

As I arrived back home to get ready for work, I distinctly remember having that sunken feeling in my gut. As a police officer that happens all the time. You develop a sixth sense about things. I was figuring it was just going to be one of those days, you know busy, full of a lot of issues, that if most people took the time to think, they could fix easily. Most times my gut was right on and I've always known to listen to it. But this time it seemed different. A feeling that I had never had before. I couldn't put my finger on it. So, I continued getting ready to go out.

At 10:45 that morning I went on duty. I had no sooner gotten off the radio, when Sgt. Bias called for other units to respond to his location, at 529 N. Nelson. The call had come out as a domestic disturbance, where a gun had already been fired. The suspect was refusing to come out of the house. When I arrived on Scene, I spoke with Sgt. Bias and he asked me to gather more information on the suspect. As I did that other units arrived.

I identified the suspect in the house as Ryan Kelley. I had known Ryan from previous dealings and knew that he used meth quite frequently. I had learned he had beat his girlfriend a good majority of the night, he only let up when their child woke and needed feeding. She had gotten out of the house just prior to our arrival. She had some friend trying to help get her things, and that is when he fired the first shot into the ceiling of his house

As I relayed this information to Sgt. Bias, Lt. Lake, and Det. Collier were standing on the front porch with us. We stood outside for several more minutes attempting to contact Ryan. By this time the house was surrounded with officers from Texas DPS, Gray County Sheriff's Office, and of course Pampa PD. After numerous failed attempts at communicating with Ryan we made the decision to enter the house. Sgt, Bias and Lt. Lake were on the porch, I was down next to the steps with Det, Collier right behind me.

The adrenaline coursing through my body at that time was intense. There had been plenty of times before where I had been scared. Anyone that's been a cop has been scared. My heart was pounding, and my thoughts were scattered. I was going through about a thousand different scenarios in my head in that few seconds prior to entry. Knowing that Ryan had recently been on a meth binge, I knew something was about to happen. The worst scenario going through my head was that the moment had selected me to be forced into using lethal force against him.

As an officer we know the possibility of using deadly force is there. The possibility is there with almost every call. In my then 13-year career, I had been fortunate and never had to use my weapon against another human being. That however was the number one thing passing through my thoughts. I slowed my breathing down and prepared for entry. Sgt. Bias had started kicking the door. It was barricaded with something large and heavy. As he made headway with the door, we forced our way in.

The house had a very distinctive odor of cigarette smoke, ammonia, and cheap candles. We gathered ourselves together and formed our line. Three facing front and one facing rear, all with our weapons out.

We slowly and methodically went through out the house. We searched the kitchen, the hallway bathroom, a bedroom, all without any sign of Ryan. As we entered the last bedroom, against the west wall was a bed, the north wall was a couch, the east wall a small closet, and the south a window. Nestled in between the bed and the couch a door. The door was your typical interior, hollow core door. It was a tight fit for myself, Detective Collier, and Sgt. Bias. Lt. Lake had taken up the rear watch. With det. Collier at my back left and Sgt, Bias at my right, we made the plan to open the door. Mind you, this had been the only door closed in the entire house. My heart is racing all that much more now. As I touched the door knob.....BAM!!!! I never saw it coming!!! I had never felt more pain in my life. My vision was gone, but my hearing was elevated!!! I heard several loud bangs, and Lt. Lake shouting on the radio, SHOTS FIRED, SHOTS FIRED!! Then I heard words I had been fortunate enough to only hear on TV. OFFICER DOWN!!! What??? Wait a minute.....I am the officer down!!

I never lost consciousness! It seemed like forever, but immediately my Lt. grabbed me by the feet and drug me out of the room. As he did this gun fire was laid down to cover him rescuing me. I don't know how many shots, at the time I didn't care. I couldn't see, and I was down.

The whole life flashing before your eyes thing, well its real! All I could think of was my family! My wife!! We had only been married 6 months!!! My 3 children, Emma 7 years old, Austin 4 years old, and Harrison 3 years old!! I couldn't die!!! I started praying, like I have never prayed before in my life! I am a Christian and have been for a long time. You know you always pray but never had I felt desperation like this! The fire department and ambulance quickly arrived. Pampa Fire department C Shift, threw their personal safety out the window, came up to an unsecure scene and placed me on a board, and ran with me to the ambulance! They got me in the ambulance, and miraculously I could talk just enough to tell them I was allergic to morphine.

One firemen, Bryan Johnson and the paramedic, Rubie Sirmans, frantically started working on me. As they were working I cried out to God to spare my life! They quickly got me to the helicopter pad, and I heard a very deep, very distinct voice tell me "It's going to be ok. We're going to take good care of you. You're going to be fine". I swore it was the voice of God coming thru the flight medic! Then the lights went out!!

I was told that as soon as they knocked me out, I was swelling, and turning blue. My airways were constricted! They watched my vital signs bottom out! They fought for my life and saved it! The medics put a tracheotomy in and reestablished my airway! I was flown to Northwest Texas Hospital and taken into emergency surgery! My airway had begun to collapse again, and they had to reestablish a more stable tracheotomy. Shortly after my wife had arrived they rolled me out, the nurse told her its okay to talk, the hearing is the last to go! Bandaged up and bloody she kissed my forehead and said she loved me. My mom was in there too, and her heart was broken, as I am the only child she had left, the only family she has left! Thankfully also were our friends Rick and Leah Pearson. They helped my wife and mother stand strong in a time when weakness was totally permissible!

The next thing I remember I was in a weird place. Surrounded by doctors, nurses and my friends and family. I don't remember a lot, because of the drugs coursing through my veins but I remember the chaos.

My wife enters the room, I teared up. I tried talking but realized I couldn't! I mouthed to Jessica "I'm Sorry"! I was sorry, not because I did wrong, but because my wife of 6 months was having to go through this! Having to go through HELL all over again! See, her first husband committed suicide, and she of all things, found him! Now, she was having to look at the aftermath of another violent gun shot. Then, there is my mom, Kathy! As I said, I'm the only surviving child she has and only family left! My oldest sister was murdered in 1990, my other sister committed suicide in 2013, my dad died of cancer in early 2014. So, I'm all she had left.

Laying there, no bandages, the left side of my jaw laying on my chest and a giant hole in my face, is what Jessica and my mom were there looking at, Hopeless, right? In comes my Pastor Dallas Stringer, I write down a verse, something that has meant so much to me, Exodus 14:14! It says, "The Lord will fight for you, you need only be quiet"! The chaos, it instantly stopped! A peace that truly surpasses all understanding entered the room! The look on Dallas's face and my family's face became so peaceful. They knew, and

then I knew, things were going to be alright! The coming months and surgeries were going to be rough, but God would guide us through.

I was in the hospital a total of 18 days in January of 2015. Originally nurses told me, that I would be in there 6 weeks, wouldn't get my tracheotomy out for at least 30 days, then I probably wouldn't be able to talk. I said to myself and prayed to God and told them they were wrong!

I am a big enough knuckle-head, that I was determined that my God was going to prove them wrong! 7 days in, the tracheotomy came out! I could talk! On the 10th day I walked out of the hospital! Miraculous! The ride home was an exceptionally emotional ride for me and my wife. Not a word was said the entire 2-hour ride home! I looked out in amazement, thankful for the chance at life again. I was greeted back home with a Hero's welcome!! A few days later I ended up back in the hospital with an infection.

But a Hero – I AM NOT! The heroes of the day are Sgt. Bias, Lt. Lake, Det. Collier, Pampa FD C-Shift, the paramedics, the doctors! They saved my life at God's direction, He guided their hands and actions! I'M NO HERO!

The coming months were filled with many doctor's appointments, surgeries of all sorts, pain, suffering, nightmares and struggles. The struggles came emotionally, spiritually, and it all affected my marriage and, can't lie, my outlook on God. I was diagnosed with PTSD! I didn't know how to deal with myself, my family, or my life! This had the makings of a perfect storm that Satan had come up with to tear apart a family! Through many tears, arguments, sleepless nights, and counseling we made it through. Now I will say that my wife Jessica, my best friend, are closer now than ever before! I had doubts like everyone does. I questioned God, and even was angry with Him. But I discovered my anger was not with HIM!

My anger was with the suspect Ryan Kelley! I HATED him so much! He ruined my life, destroyed my marriage, and messed with my family! He caused so much pain! I tell you if you would have granted me 5 minutes with him, I would have torn him limb from limb. I would have destroyed him as he did me!

So, here we are September, 2016. Ryan this whole time had sat in jail. He plead not guilty and decided to go to trial. Which I get it. If my life was in the balance between prison and freedom, I would probably plead not guilty too!

I had to go back and relive that nightmare yet again. The hours of preparation by the prosecution. The questions, the videos, the audio of that day came back, and it was all too real. It seemed that during this year and a half I could never escape that nightmare. The trial begins and like all trials, at least here in Texas, the cops weren't allowed in, and I was kept away from the venue.

The day I testified, I remember looking at Ryan square in the eyes, as I took the oath and started being questioned. I only broke contact when the prosecutor was asking me questions. After I left the stand, I felt RELIEF! A burden had been truly lifted from me. That

afternoon the closing statements were made. As I sat there, Ryan turned and looked at me. I looked back, I was not going to break eyes with him either! I wanted evil to see justice! As he looked at me, he mouthed the words "I'm Sorry"! What? Seriously?

God started working on me right then! I had my two best friends with me and they prayed with me. As the arguments ceased, and court put on recess, Ryan's attorney Robyn Nance came up to me and apologized to me for all I had been through. Something got me, and I asked her if I could talk with Ryan! Just for 5 minutes! I could only imagine what she was thinking! I'm sure she imagined me beating him senseless. But she said she would ask him. Robyn came back a few minutes later and Ryan had granted my request.

The jury had come back with their verdict. They Found Ryan guilty of one count of Attempted Capital Murder of a Peace officer and one count of Aggravated Assault against a Peace officer. In total he received 50 years in prison.

Now was the time that I got to talk with him. My friend Chris Keller came in with me. Robyn Nance and Ryan came in the room as well. Outside the room, there were 4 deputies. I can only assume, they were there watching me, I think they believed I was going to do something stupid! Do you remember the 5 MINUTES I told you about a couple paragraphs earlier? Well this 5 minutes was completely different that what I first imagined!

As I started speaking, there was a lot of tension in the room. Ryan, at first started off pretty cocky! I quickly stopped that, as I told him of how he ruined my life, how he nearly ruined my marriage, and how he messed with my family. But then in as calm of a voice as I have ever had, I told Ryan there was a forgiveness in this room that can only be given by God! I looked around the room, and Robyn, had a stunned look on her face. Then I looked at Ryan and said, I too forgive you! The room was filled with the Holy Spirit as I had never experienced Him before! We joined hands and prayed! Yes...you read that right! I joined hands with the man that shot me and prayed with him! My friend Chris lead the prayer. Robyn, cried!

I left that room 2000 pounds lighter. My burden and hatred had been left at the foot of the Cross! The very Cross Jesus bled and died for all our sins on! My wife Jessica was not able to be in the room at that time and was heartbroken. I got home and literally could not speak. My mind had not yet grasped what truly took place in that room. Again, a peace that surpassed all understanding with the Holy Spirit was present. Me and Chris talked about it for weeks afterwards. Each time we learned something new, something miraculous!

As I have had time to digest it all, I look back and wouldn't change a thing! It is said best in Genesis 50:20 "What was meant for evil, God used for good and the saving of many lives!"

This journey has not been easy. It was tough and cumbersome, and overwhelming at times. But it has been filled with much joy and blessings. God used this to mold me into the man I am today! He used it to mold my relationship with Jessica, my wife! He used it to bring people closer to Him! As for what Ryan's decision was, I do not know! The seed was

planted, and I hope being watered. Although forgiveness was given he must still serve his sentence. I just hope it is done according to the way God wants it.

It took me 27 months and 19 days to return to work. I switched to a different agency and became chief of Police. God is Good!