

Hero School Employee Demonstrates Value of Training

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Before Aug. 20, likely only a few family members and friends had heard the name Antoinette Tuff. But the Georgia woman's courage, compassion and poise in the face of danger has rightly earned her the label of "hero."

On an ordinary day at the Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Ga., 20-year-old Michael Brandon Hill arrived carrying an AK-47-style assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammo.

As soon as the man entered the elementary school and fired one round into the floor, Tuff called 911 and turned her attention on calming the man. While she kept a conversation going between herself, the shooter and the dispatcher, 870 students were being hustled to safety through a back door.

Hill confided that he was being treated for mental illness and was "off his meds." He said he had nothing to live for and seemed determined to take victims on his way out.

But the school bookkeeper remained calm, confiding her own problems, which included a failed marriage and disabled adult.

"It's going to be all right, sweetie," Tuff told Hill, as she finally convinced him to surrender. "I just want you to know I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you. That's a good thing that you're just giving up and don't worry about it. We all go through something in life. No, you don't want that. You're going to be OK."

Trained hostage negotiators who have reviewed the 911 tape say Tuff handled the potentially explosive situation incredibly well. President Obama and others have called her a hero. Because she put her life on the line, the Georgia community and the world celebrated the outcome, rather than mourned the loss of innocent lives.

Tuff was one of three people specifically trained at the school to handle violent situations. Certainly her incredible courage should be credited with the outcome. But the Decatur school district provided her with additional tools to know how to intervene.

And that is what all employers should do: Prepare employees to respond to emergencies.

The preparation should go beyond a quarterly – or in some cases, annual – fire drill to review exit plans. Preparing employees to respond to emergencies should be part of the corporate culture, with commitment to training flowing from the top and reaching the entire workforce.

A workplace emergency can be a fire, chemical spill, sudden cardiac arrest or an angry customer or co-worker. Often an emergency is specific to the business or industry. Developing emergency plans and preparing employees to respond should include:

- Establishing a workforce committee that includes management and rank and file employees to identify risks, or potential emergencies, and developing effective responses.
- Communicating plans to all employees.
- Regularly reviewing plans with supervisors and employees.
- Expanding response skills by bringing in outside experts, such as law enforcement and medical staff, and scheduling training sessions.

After the armed intruder surrendered and was taken into custody, Tuff told the 911 operator: "I've never been so scared in all the days of my life. Oh, Jesus."

Who wouldn't be scared? But a combination of training and Tuff's "true grit" transformed a potential tragedy into a reason to celebrate.

It also demonstrated the importance of preparing employees to respond to all emergencies.

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Tuesday, September 18, 2013. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the [PAS Facebook](#) page or by phone at 631-2165.

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