

Permission to Defend Yourself
An Interview with Tom Givens

by Gila Hayes, ACLDN

Uncertainty leads to hesitation and half measures and that's bad indeed during self defense. We need to solidify the resolve to prevail. I wonder if the will to fight is largely an ideal in the minds of many, or if decisive self defense is needed, will we jump in and take action?

Our Advisory Board member Tom Givens has taught defensive firearms for over four decades, and 67 of his graduates from the private sector have been involved in shootings with 64 prevailing. Clearly, Tom has a good handle on the self-defense mindset. We switch now to Q & A to share Givens' lessons directly with members.

eJournal: Thank you for speaking with me today, Tom. I'd like to explore with you the mind set and the mental preparation that facilitates decisive action to stop criminal violence.

Givens: Several years ago, a psychologist went through several of my classes. After about the third class, he came up to me and said, "I think I know why your students do so well in a real fight. It's because you give them permission to defend themselves."

Students come to class with a large dose of cultural indoctrination that encourages them to be victims. It is hard to get rid of that cultural baggage. "Don't fight back. Call 9-1-1 so somebody else makes the bad man go away..." all of which we know isn't going to happen. We beat it into students' heads that nobody is going to come and save you. It is up to you and you have a right to save yourself.

Students have been taught from childhood that they don't have a right to fight back. If someone punches you at school and you fight back, you'll both be expelled. You've been taught that you may not defend yourself. That entire mindset about violence changes when I explain that you have rights, but it is up to *you* to enforce your rights.

eJournal: There's a tendency to group all violence under one heading and that is entitled "Bad."

Givens: What criminals do is antisocial violence. It is violence that is against the law and it breaks the social contract. It is immoral, illegal and wrong. There is such a thing as prosocial violence. Prosocial violence is violence done in pursuit of good. An example might be a soldier doing his duty in time of warfare, a policeman enforcing the law, or a private citizen fighting to stay alive when someone unlawfully invades his home.

When you get people to understand that there is such a thing as prosocial violence, that it is perfectly OK and they have a right to do it, then violence becomes a useful tool.

The most basic human right is to stay alive, to not be killed or raped or otherwise harmed. You have to develop a willingness to assert that right. You have to know, “I am not going to let you unlawfully murder me, rape me, cripple me. I am not going to let you do those things to me and I am not going to let you do them to my family.” Until you firmly draw that line in your own mind, the whole thing is theoretical.

eJournal: What steps leads to firmly drawing that line?

Givens: Being raped and murdered seems to be a real good way, but it doesn't do any good because then you're dead. Years ago, we used to get people in training who were proactive and decided maybe they ought to do something before it happens to them. Now we get people who, because of their culture, are reactive. Thinking they could be raped or murdered is entirely subjective, entirely imaginary until it happens to someone they know.

It's imaginary until your neighbor gets shot in his driveway while you are across the street, sitting in your house watching TV. Now, all of a sudden, that is real. If a co-worker is carjacked or a member of your church group gets raped, all of a sudden it is real. If you can put a person's name on it, then it is real, so I think a big piece of it is knowing someone to whom it happened. Everybody puts so much energy into trying to convince themselves that it will never happen to them and that it will only happen to someone else. I tell people to remember that to everyone else on the planet you're “somebody else.”

eJournal: So, a man or woman draws that mental line. Now, we have to train, practice and prepare our defenses. Because our concept of violence is pretty theoretical, we're often not sure what we're preparing to face and subsequently don't know what to train to defend against. When private citizens defend themselves, what kinds of attacks do we see over and over?

Givens: I call it the Four Rs: Robbery, Rape, Road Rage and Respect. Almost without exception, those are the four things that get private citizens into shootings. Those are pretty much it.

Robbery: somebody tried to forcibly take something away from you whether it was your money, your watch or your car keys. What they are taking from you is irrelevant. What matters is that they are taking it from you in person through force and violence. That's what robbery is. If you add a weapon, it's armed robbery.

Robbery is probably the most common reason private citizens would actually have to reach for a gun. The majority of our student-involved shootings have been due to robberies. If somebody tried to stick you up in a parking lot, somebody tried to rob your little business, you're car jacked at gun point, or somebody kicked down the door of your house with a gun in their hand, all of those are iterations of armed robbery. That's why I say robbery is probably the most common.

When you talk about rape, a lot of people don't realize that about 20% of rape victims are male, it is not exclusively a female problem by any stretch of the imagination. Male rape is pretty often a death sentence as it is not a one-on-one crime, it is usually a three- or four-on-one crime, and

typically at least some of the participants are HIV positive, so you are pretty likely to get very ill afterwards. That is a pretty serious issue.

Road rage: We're seeing more and more cases of shootings arising from road rage. I assume that every vehicle around me has a gun in it. You could say three out of four motorists have guns, but then you have to ask which one doesn't have a gun?

I'm just going to assume they all do, so I'm not going to flip off the guy in that Buick over there, because I have to presume he has a gun. I'm not going to give the one-finger salute to somebody that passes me because they might shoot out the right window and hit me in the face, and there really is not much I could do to stop that. Road rage is a real common problem that people need to avoid. You need to yield the lane, or whatever, because an awful lot of the cars out there have guns in them.

Respect is the fourth reason people get in shootings. You would be amazed how many assaults start with, "He disrespected me." The problem with respect is that it doesn't matter if you did or if you didn't. All that matters is his perception. That's it. If some man thinks you looked at his girlfriend wrong, it doesn't matter if you did or didn't. It makes no difference at all. What matters is what he thinks.

If you take someone's parking space, a space that's "his," that he's been waiting on, that's a territorial issue. Males will fight to the death over territory. A normal, well-adjusted person would say, "It's just a parking space," but to him, you have just taken away something from him that on a basic, primal level he will defend to the death. People get killed over territory every day!

The Dinkheller killing involved a deputy killed during a traffic stop because he told a much older man to take his hands out of his pockets. That offended the man to the point that he went to his car, got a rifle, loaded a magazine for the rifle, loaded the rifle, shot the deputy until he got him down and then stood over him and shot him through the head. Now, you ask a normal person, "Would you kill a man over telling you to take your hands out of your pockets?" Well, of course not! Not everybody's a normal person.

eJournal: Few have real life experience being attacked and fighting back. In fact, we strive to avoid the experience, so we are left wondering will we act fast enough to survive?

Givens: Nowadays video cameras are everywhere, so every day we get dozens and dozens and dozens of shootings on video, quite a lot involving private citizens. If you are not at home, you are probably on camera. According to the last estimate I saw there are at least 20 million people legally carrying guns in this country. We get private citizen shootings now on a daily basis. When you look at the video, you'll notice that the preliminary dancing depends entirely on what kind of crime it is.

Somebody might follow a female through a shopping center for 20 minutes before following her out onto the parking lot and then initiating a violent assault at the end of that time frame. But the first 20 minutes don't count, because the violent assault is going to be over in just a matter of seconds.

If you are pumping gas at a 7-11 and a car pulls up next to you and one of them steps out with a gun, there is very little lead up. The time is no more than it took to pull off the street and stop next to you. But again, once the dude steps out of the car and produces a gun, that assault is going to be over pretty quickly.

When you look at these videos, the preliminary steps can vary greatly. Once the guns come out, though, it is only about a three to five second window before it is over one way or the other. It's done! The majority of these things happen from two steps away to the length of a car or just barely beyond that. At those kinds of distances, in three to five seconds it is over in one way or another—everybody's out of ammo, they're shot and down or they've run off.

eJournal: I will always remember a phrase you once used in a lecture. You were discussing a female student who shot an armed robber in her store. Of her, you said, "The thug started the incident, but our student started the fight." What did you mean?

Givens: Generally speaking, whoever starts the fight wins it. There is a huge, huge gap if you are trying to catch up with somebody else. Craig "Southnarc" Douglas calls it "the initiative deficit". Clint Smith calls it being "in the hole". They are both describing the same thing: they are describing trying to play catch-up when you are behind the eight-ball. It is very difficult to do. The FBI is doing a lot of research right now into police officer murders. The same behavioral scientists who did the profiling on serial murderers are delving very deeply into police murders and learning some very interesting things.

In two-thirds—66 percent of—police officer murders, the officer starts the contact. He makes the traffic stop; he asks the pedestrian to stop and talk to him; he initiates the contact with the suspect. The suspect bides his time and waits while the officer looks at his driver's license or talks on the radio or turns to go back to the patrol car, and then the suspect initiates the sudden, violent assault. The suspect initiates the fight.

The officer is behind the curve; he has got to catch up from the initiative deficit. In two-thirds of the cases in which officers are killed, they are behind the curve and they can't catch up fast enough. To put it really bluntly, the officer started the contact but the offender started the fight.

That robbery you mentioned is a perfect example. The guy comes in thinking I'm going to produce a gun, tell her what to do and she is going to do it. Everything in his life experience tells him that when he pulls a gun on somebody and tells them what to do that they will comply, so that is what his mind is set up to see; that is what he expects. He comes in and accosts the clerk, expecting compliance. He then starts the contact.

When she side-stepped and pulled that gun, it was the last thing in the world he expected. She started the fight. By the time his brain plays catch up, he's got the initiative deficit. She doesn't. She has seized the initiative by moving and drawing a gun. He was playing catch up and never got out of the hole. He caught a bullet in the chest and never got a shot off even though he started with a gun in his hand pointed at her.

eJournal: Often, a criminal has attacked a number of victims in the same way numerous times. We likely have not reacted to as many attacks as they've perpetrated, so here's a different deficit—an experience deficit. How do we overcome that disadvantage?

Givens: Well, the lady in the shooting you asked about had been robbed twice before. The last time, she had been put on the floor with a gun to the base of her skull and told she was about to die. By sheer luck, the police pulled into the parking lot to get a cup of coffee and the robber assumed that she had tripped a silent alarm although she didn't have one. The robber vaulted over the counter and ran out the door while the cop was getting out of his car. That is the only reason she is still alive.

She made up her mind at that point, "I'm not going through this again," so she came and took a couple of classes and armed herself and took care of business the next time. She was already mentally primed.

Later, she told me and these are her words, "After the second robbery, the next son of a bitch that pulls a gun on me is getting shot." She had what we call a pre-made decision, so when the third guy came in and produced a pistol she simply took a couple of steps to the side and shot him. Her mental trigger was "The next time a robber points a gun at me, I'm going to shoot him," so she was not thinking, "Oh, no, this guy is pointing a gun at me! What am I going to do?" No, she had already decided, "I am not going to go through that again."

eJournal: Could you tell us more about the process of solidifying the "premade decision?"

Givens: I believe the simplest thing to do is to subscribe to a big-city newspaper. It doesn't make any difference which city, just pick one and subscribe. In every big-city newspaper that I have ever seen, the first section deals with international and national news and then the second part deals with the local stuff. Some places call it the Metro section, others call it the local news.

You will notice that the local section is nothing more than a litany of yesterday's atrocities. The local section is just a big list of all the serious crimes that happened yesterday—stories about a woman being carjacked here, a store that got robbed there, this guy got shot in his driveway. The local news is just a recitation of yesterday's crimes.

Subscribe to the paper, and every morning as you drink your coffee or eat your breakfast, open that local section and pick just two of the crime stories. Read them and ask yourself these questions.

How did this guy get into this? If you look at these critically, an awful lot of the time these crimes are victim-facilitated or victim-precipitated. A guy got robbed at three in the morning at an ATM. OK, note to self, don't go to the ATM at three in the morning. You are identifying victim behavior and every day reinforcing in your mind that it is not what you want to do. By calling it risky behavior and seeing the result of it, you become a lot less likely to do it.

So, the first thing you ask is, "Why did this happen?" and you look for the factors that created the opportunity. Criminals are opportunists, so if take away the opportunities, you take away the crimes. You eliminate the opportunity by learning not to engage in these risky behaviors.

The second question to ask yourself is, "If I got into it, how would I get out?" You look at the specific crime in the story, this guy was doing this and the bad guys were doing that and they wound up robbing him and shooting him. You ask, "Well, what would I have done to fix this problem? How would I have dealt with it?"

What are you are getting practice doing every single morning? You're making tactical decisions, and then if you have to do it for real, it is not the first time you had to do it. You've been doing it every day of your life. You've done it five days a week for years. To me, it is far more sensible to let somebody else take the bullet but you take the lesson.

eJournal: Your recommended daily review of common crimes may also emphasize how common it is for people just like us in our own communities to be violently attacked.

Givens: It amazes me how little people realize what goes on around them every day. The typical person is so woefully ignorant of the actual level of violence in the country. The media likes to tell you that violent crime is down. That is an outright, abject lie. It is a good example of using statistics in a manner to massage the message into what you want.

What they should say is that the official murder rate is down. The murder rate is not down because people are not trying to kill each other. Few actually die from their injuries because of advanced trauma care. The trauma center in Memphis is an example. There are twenty hospitals in the metropolitan area, but The Med is a Class One trauma center. It has a very good, nationwide reputation. They lose less than one percent of people presenting with vital signs, which means if they roll you in the door with a pulse, you are going to walk back out 99 out of 100 times. So, the vast majority of victims someone tried to murder don't wind up dying from their injuries, thus there was no homicide.

What is the official murder tally, the official murder count, in the United States? Officially, it is about 12,500. Guess what doesn't count? 30,000 people a year who just disappear without a trace and are never seen again. People who study murder for a living will tell you that the majority of those 30,000 permanent disappearances are properly disposed of homicide victims. I happen to be on I-75 in Florida right now, just south of the I-4 corridor. The I-4 corridor has wooded medians all through it and bodies turn up there constantly. It is one of the major dumping grounds in the US for murders. Some of those homicides are ten or fifteen years old by the time a

work crew finds the skeleton. The number of murders in the United States is not 12,500 per year; it is more like 40,000.

Let's not quibble about official murder tallies, because murder isn't your primary concern. It is aggravated assaults you have to worry about. In the US, we have from a million to 1.2 million aggravated assaults per year. That means someone tried to kill you but a trauma center intervened and saved your life. You may have had multiple surgeries, you may have lost an arm or leg, or may be blind, could be paralyzed, but you did not die, and if you did not die, it is not homicide. It is aggravated assault. We have 1.2 million aggravated assaults a year: that affects one out of every 300 people.

The murder rate is down, but not because people don't try to kill each other. 1.2 million times a year people try to kill each other, but modern medicine keeps those from being successful. Robbery with injury to the victim, we have about a quarter of a million a year; rapes run about a quarter of a million a year; aggravated assaults still run about a million a year. Those are all violent interpersonal crimes with serious, life-long ramifications.

The typical person hears the talking head on the news say, "Violent crime is down by ten percent," and they think it's true. Violent crime happens all across the US. It doesn't matter where you live. I used to deer hunt in a county that only had about 15,000 people in it and the county seat had 11,000 people in it, and per capita, the homicide rate was the same as Memphis. It was just that it was so much smaller community that their murder count would be two or three, but per capita there were just as many as in a major city. It makes no difference where you are!

eJournal: That's a lesson for those of us who have moved out of big, metro areas seeking a quieter, safer life! You really do hear people say, "I'm going to move to a nicer community where violent crime does not happen."

Givens: People tell me, "I live in a nice, affluent neighborhood," and I say, "That means you have cameras and money and jewelry and credit cards and stuff in your house that other people want. You are basically sitting on the cheese in the rat trap. You are exactly the kind of person a career thug is looking for."

eJournal: Another thing we do is hedge our fear and discomfort behind sanitized words like "interpersonal violence." If we're honestly preparing to defend against rape, assault and murder, we must come to terms with the evil humans do to one another.

Givens: People who haven't seen the results of violence up close just have no concept. We are talking about lives being shattered. If you're murdered, it not only affects you, but it affects a lot of other people, too.

Who is affected if you're murdered? Do you have a spouse or children? How are they going to deal with your sudden, completely unplanned for permanent absence? How are those children going to get a decent education? When they need help from a parent, you're not going to be

there. They're going to grow up, graduate, get married, have kids—all without you. They are going to have to get through life without you. What about your co-workers and friends? Most people have some friends. When one person is murdered, it negatively impacts dozens of lives, and in some cases, very seriously.

Then, imagine the results of an aggravated assault. You didn't die, but if you are permanently disabled how are you going to take care of your family from that point on? Your family is going to be negatively impacted; your earning potential just went out the window in the blink of an eye.

There is just so much more cost in human terms to violent crime than most people imagine. It happens so many times every day. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics there are about six million violent crimes a year in the US. That's one for about every 54 people but that is one for every 30 adults.

One of the things that amuses me is when people say, "I know that the odds of me needing this gun is one in a million." Well, the odds are not one in a million. There is one violent crime for every thirty adults every year in this country, and that is just one single year. Your lifetime odds are more like one in three.

That's why I encourage people to say, instead of "I can't believe this is happening," to say, "Oh, I guess I am one of the three." Deal with it instead of being dismayed and astounded by it. Say, "I expected this!"

eJournal: It is also tempting to get all wrapped up thinking, "Why is this crime happening to me?"

Givens: It is happening to you because you happened to be here when the criminal came by.

eJournal: It is not personal. You just got caught in the net instead of the next guy who happened along.

Givens: I would encourage our readers to Google "Petit family murders." That was a family in Connecticut that lived in a very safe, very nice, upscale suburban neighborhood in a big 4,000 square foot house. Dr. Petit and his wife, who was a nurse, had two young daughters—eleven and seventeen years old.

On Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Petit and the eleven-year-old went to the supermarket to buy some supplies for a birthday party the next day. Two o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday—that is not what I would call risky behavior! A career criminal saw them in the store and followed them around and out onto the parking lot and watched them get in their car, followed their car home and saw the home they went into.

He called up his friend, who turned out to be a serial murderer, and told him what he had seen. So, at three o'clock in the morning, they go to that house, go inside and beat the doctor

unconscious with a baseball bat, rape and strangle Mrs. Petit to death, then after raping the two little girls, tied them to their beds, doused them with gasoline and burned them alive.

Then they get caught by police as they exit the property. There was no question about their guilt. The “risky” behavior that started the whole deal was going to the supermarket at two in the afternoon. Now, the Petits lived in a high income, low crime, safe suburban neighborhood in a nice house. Someone picked them anyway. You can’t say Mrs. Petit’s behavior was risky! She’s buying groceries at 2 in the afternoon on a Sunday. She didn’t choose to be a crime victim. Someone else picked her to be a crime victim and all it took was being seen in public.

eJournal: That challenges the strategy, “I’ll just be super careful.”

Givens: The first thing that you’ve got to do is just accept that there are people like those two men. These guys are out there. None of them stay in prison for any length of time because of prison overcrowding. In most states, the sentences and the time actually served is so far apart that it is ridiculous. They go in, they come out, they go in, they come out, they go in, they come out. It is a cycle repeated over and over until they come to the end of their lives. You have to understand that you are swimming in the same water with them and it doesn’t matter whether you like it or not.

I would not consider the supermarket at two in the afternoon to be a high-risk environment. However, there are career, multiple-offender murderers who go to supermarkets, as well. When you are in the grocery store, you have no control over who else is in that store. When they spot you and say, “Oh! I like the looks of that person’s watch or ring,” or “I like the car that person is getting into,” or whatever, you have been selected whether you like it or not, whether you engaged in any risky behavior or not, or whether you want to be or not, it makes no damn difference! You just have to expect it. You can do everything right and do nothing wrong and you can still be picked. When that happens, you will have to be the one that fixes it.

eJournal: Better to study the Petit family tragedy and then decide, “What will we do if criminals break in at night?” and build some procedures and plans.

Givens: Well, the first thing: those two did not break in. They walked in through the unlocked front door. Lock your damn doors. We live in a world with people like those two in it, lock your damn doors. If they have to kick the door down, at least you get some warning that something is up, but if someone smacks you in the head with a baseball bat as you sleep, it is a little late to get in the loop.

Jeff Cooper said this is almost like a revival meeting. You have open up and say, “Yes, it can happen to me. I must be ready to deal with it.”

eJournal: What a great summation of a big subject.

Givens: We're not being a sheepdog, we are not looking for problems, but if somebody attempts to harm or kill us, we will make them stop. We have the requisite skills to do that. Without both mindset and skills, you're kidding yourself. Skills without the ability to use them are useless. The mindset without the ability to carry out your will is useless. You have got to have both.

Do the bulk of your training inside the length of a car, do some work beyond it, just in case you run out of luck. I have a student who had to take a shot at 22 yards—by the way, he planted his shot right smack in the middle of the guy's sternum at a measured 22 yards away. He later sat down in my office and talked to me about that, and you could kind of see the light bulb come on over his head. He said, and this is a quote, "When I had to shoot that guy all the way across the street, it never occurred to me that I was a statistical exception. I just had to deal with it." That's an insightful statement.

The guy on the other side of the street was firing a pistol at my student who had children around him. With the children's lives in immediate danger, he had to respond. He moved to draw fire away from the children and then he engaged from the middle of his front yard to all the way across on the other side of the street. He hit the guy and put an end to the problem. He had been to the range to practice nine times in the 12 months that preceded the shooting. Do you think that might have had some effect?

Again, though, that skill without the will is meaningless, just as the will without the skill is meaningless, too.

eJournal: That's the challenge—and as always, you've inspired us to do better. Thank you for all the knowledge and encouragement you share, Tom. It's truly a privilege to have you as part of our Network Advisory Board.

Tom Givens and his wife Lynn Givens operate Rangemaster Training Services and organize the Rangemaster Tactical Conferences each year. Tom's experience includes a 25-year career in law enforcement and specialized security work, operating an indoor range in Memphis, TN for nearly two decades, and he is a certified expert witness on firearms and police firearms training in state and federal court. Learn more at <https://rangemaster.com/about/tom-givens/>.