

A PROFILE IN COURAGE

It was about 6:50 p.m., Sept. 15, 1999, when Larry Gene Ashbrook walked into the south foyer of the Wedgewood Baptist Church house at 5522 Whitman Ave. in Ft. Worth, Tx. He was smoking a cigarette. Jeff Laster, 34, approached him to say that smoking was not allowed in the church building. "Is this where that damn religious ceremony is going on?" Ashbrook said, and then pulled out a gun and shot Laster.

He shot six times at the first group in the foyer. He wounded Jaynanne Brown, 41, and killed Sydney Browning, 36.

Ashbrook walked down the hall and encountered Kevin Galey, 38, a church counsellor. He shot Galey twice. The third bullet missed him and struck the wall. Galey survived.

Ashbrook shot through the glass and then entered the auditorium. He fired one round into the ceiling and then seven at the stage. Shawn Brown saw what was happening and tried to get into the Pastor's Office to call 911. The door was locked. He went back toward the auditorium, Ashbrook saw him, and fatally wounded him with three shots.

Ashbrook continued firing at random. He walked down the aisle and saw Kimberly Jones 23, huddling in a rear pew. He backed up and killed her.

Justin Ray, 17, was killed while video taping the massacre. Justin Laird, 16 was wounded, and Joey Ennis 14, was killed. The next random shots were fatal to Cassandra Griffin and Kristi Beckel, both 14. Robert Debord 17, and Nicholas Skinner, 14, were both wounded.

Mary Beth Talley, 17, was shot in the shoulder as she used her own body to protect her life long friend, Heather McDonald.

Ashbrook had fired 64 shots. When he emptied a clip he would methodically reload. He still had six more clips in his pocket, with over 100 rounds available for more killing. When he began cursing Christianity, however, something happened in the mind of nineteen year old Jeremiah Neitz. (pronounced "nights") Jeremiah was a visitor at the prayer meeting. He had been quietly praying for it all to end, but when Ashbrook kept saying that Christianity was B.S. Jeremiah stood up and said: "Sir, what you need is Jesus Christ."

Ashbrook pointed his gun at Neitz and yelled an expletive at him.

"It wasn't anything to do with me; it was all God" Neitz said. With his youth minister tugging at his pants to get him to lie down, Neitz somehow found the courage to face down the killer. He put his hands to his side and said: "Sir, you can shoot me if you want. But I know where I'm going. I'm going to heaven. What about you?"

It was at this point that Ashbrook turned the gun on himself, and took his own life.

Adam Hammond, Neitz's youth minister, said that he believed that his courageous actions may have been the reason the killer quit shooting so abruptly. "God's fingerprints are all over what happened here" he said.

Jesus said it like this: "**And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.**" (Luke 12:4-5)

