

# The Hero

WITHIN

*A rampaging bear, a deadly fire, a murderous gunman and more: How we find the courage to step up big when facing life-or-death risks*

**By David Hochman**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN LAXTON

**QEMAL AGAJ**

## Saved A Woman From Drowning

*In the fall of 2007, Agaj, then 65, rescued a swimmer in Florida.*

**I**T WAS A GORGEOUS morning on Cocoa Beach when these green-black clouds rolled in and the ocean started getting rough. Suddenly, this guy on the beach started yelling, “My wife! My wife! She’s in the ocean and can’t get out!”

I was born and raised by the sea in my country, Albania, and I know how tides work from a lifetime of swimming in them. This was a rip current, which meant the tide takes you out fast but fights you from swimming back in. Another man I never met before—a big guy around 50 years old—jumped in with me, and we swam straight to

the lady. I knew from getting caught in a tide like this when I was a teen that you have to swim back at an angle, not directly toward shore. We told the lady—she was in her late 60s—to swim next to us and stay calm, to press my shoulder if she needed help. You don’t want someone hanging on you; they can pull you under when they’re afraid of drowning. She was swimming OK, but the man got separated. This is the worst part. By the time the rescue team got to him, it was too late. He died trying to save a woman he never met.

The experience changed me. The

man who drowned was a father with two kids. For a long while, I couldn’t get his death out my mind. At the same time, the woman is alive. We’ve become friends. It reminds me every day to be optimistic about life and, especially, to try to do good things with the brief time we have, to be good.

### MY HERO

This was a terrible experience. Somebody died, but somebody was saved, and it’s because Qemal didn’t think, *I could get hurt*. That’s who he is. —Flora Agaj, Qemal’s wife

PHOTO CREDIT: TEEKAY







**WILLIAM AYOTTE**

## Fought Off a Bear With a Shovel

*In 2013, Ayotte, battled a polar bear that was savagely mauling a woman in Churchill, Canada. He was 69.*

**I**T WAS FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, and I was downstairs watching TV when I heard somebody screaming, "Help! It's a bear!" I opened my front door, and the scene just exploded into view: A 275-pound polar bear was sitting on its haunches against my next-door neighbor's house and had a woman in its mouth. He had her by the head and was waving her around like a rag doll.

I thought to myself, *I've got no rifle. I've got no weapon or anything.* I knew she had to be helped, and I glanced down my veranda and saw my shovel sitting there, and I found myself almost involuntarily going to get it. Once I picked it up, I thought, *Well, am I going to do anything, or is that woman going*

*to die?* I thought about calling for help but dismissed that option, because by the time anyone would get there, she would be dead.

So down the steps I went and over toward the bear and the woman. When I got over there, I stepped up right away and hit the bear in the eye. I'd heard this is the best way to fight a bear. He let go of the woman, and she ran into my house and slammed the door. The bear reached out and grabbed ahold of me, and the mauling was on. In my head I was thinking, *Well, this isn't going too well.* The bear tore off my right ear, and I was waiting for

him to bite me again. A neighbor fired a shotgun, but he was too far away and it didn't do any good, so he jumped into his truck and gunned it toward us. I was on my belly on the ground, watching this vehicle speeding our way, and it stopped about two feet away before the bear let me go.

### MY HERO

"Thank you" will never be enough. He gave me life. It's the most remarkable thing a person can do—risk his life for another human being, a stranger!

—Erin Greene,  
attack victim

I spent seven days in the hospital. They worked on me for four hours one day, to staple my wounds, and then they for four hours the next day, putting my ear back on. So I came out of it pretty good. I never saw myself as a hero and still don't. You're dealt a situation, and you either respond or you don't do anything. People say, "Would you have done

anything differently?" I haven't the faintest idea. The only thing I could think was, *If I don't do anything, she's not going to make it.*

DONNIE NAVIDAD

## Caught A Falling Woman

In 2013, Navidad, then 61, saved a woman who toppled from a football stadium in Oakland, California.

**M**Y FRIEND AND I were at the Coliseum to see the Raiders play the Tennessee Titans. After the game, as we were heading out, someone's phone fell and smashed near us, and then a bunch of people started pointing up. There was a woman up there on the edge of the railing. I turned to Glenn and said, "Do you think she's gonna jump?" He said, "Oh, boy, she's falling as we speak."

It's about a four-story drop from where she fell, and—without thinking—I just put my arms out as she came toward me. Listen, I was in the Marines, and even though that was 40-some years ago, I still think like a Marine; fortunately, I still react like one once in a while. She leveled out flat as she hit my arms, and bounced off me and fell about four feet away. I fell to the ground, too, from the impact, and I blacked out for a minute. When I came to, Glenn was holding up fingers and saying,

### MY HERO

Donnie's seen a lot. S--t doesn't scare him. Many people would turn away if they saw 100 pounds dropping down on them. But he just saved her life—Glenn Israel, friend

girl. But what bothered me was that I didn't do a better job of saving her. I couldn't really latch on to her.

“How many do you see?” I was OK. The woman was alive, but was in a coma for a while and had brain surgery. She later told me she was very grateful—they call her Miracle

SHIRLEY WHITE

## Saved Neighbors From a Wildfire

White, then 85, helped preserve the Montecito Heights area of Los Angeles from a fire in October 2017.

**T**HE CRASH woke me up. Just after midnight, on a very windy Sunday last October, I heard a very loud noise, and it was a large fir tree falling into my yard from the neighbor's yard. It crushed a greenhouse and took down the tip of a power line as it landed. I've been in my house almost 50 years and know how much damage wind and trees can do, but as I was coming downstairs and glanced outside, I was horrified to see brilliant flames outside my window, way up over my head.

### MY HERO

I'm 61, and her heroism reminded me what I already knew: It's not about age; it's about spirit. You're never too old to fight a determined fight.

—Mark Quattrocchi, neighbor

hill. I threw on something over my nightgown, raced outside, grabbed a hose and started spraying water as hard as I could. The wind had already spread the flames to a live oak and then to some blackberry vines on the edge of my driveway. It was really howling now, and I could feel the heat, but I just braced myself and kept on squirting.

This must have gone on for five minutes, but it felt like an hour. An architect neighbor smelled smoke and ran over to help. Then the couple across the driveway came, and someone called the fire department. When the

fire trucks arrived, they yelled at us to move back, but I couldn't stop. I said, "We have to keep water on this fire."

I had no idea I had done anything special. People I never met were knocking on my front door the next day, saying, "You're a hero. You saved the hill." But I was just the first responder. I saw what I saw, and I took action.

Thousands of people lost everything that night in other parts of California. We were fortunate to be spared. But I don't think it was a miracle. The reality is my children weren't there and my husband wasn't there, and if I wanted to stay in the home I loved, I would have to step up. So I did—but then got a lot of help.



## HOW TO BE A HERO

### 1 Keep your eyes peeled

"Situational awareness" is that 007-like sensitivity to warning signs or threats.

**2 Don't pass the buck.** Heroes don't wait for others to take ac-

tion, they step up, and quickly.

**3 Put others first.** "When someone dives into a frozen lake to save a child, they're thinking altruistically, not, *Hey, what's in this for me?*" says Eric P. Zahren,

president of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission.

**4 Be humble.** True good Samaritans believe they are simply doing what anyone in their situation would have done.



VICKIE WILLIAMS-TILLMAN

## Jumped Into a Fight to Help a Cop

In February 2017, Williams-Tillman, then 57, helped out a police officer struggling with a dangerous suspect in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

**O**N A BEAUTIFUL SUNDAY morning last February, I was cruising down the street, listening to gospel music before church, and turned down a little side street. I saw a squad car stopped, and a police officer and another man in a scuffle. I rolled down my window and called out to the officer, “Do you need help?”

He nodded, so I called the police and gave the location. But as I waited for them to arrive, I started to worry about the officer, whose name is Billy Aime. A pair of handcuffs dangled from a wrist of the suspect. Officer Billy’s nightstick, flashlight and radio were on the ground. It turned out that before I had gotten there, while other people drove right on past, the suspect had hit Billy on the head with the nightstick.

“Are you going to be OK?” I asked him. He didn’t answer me, but we locked eyes—his were watery, and I felt mine get watery, too. Those eyes said,

“Don’t leave me.”

The next thing I knew, I had gotten out of my car, and I was gliding toward them like I had on roller skates. It was almost like I wasn’t in my body. My mind just went blank and free. I

### MY HERO

I’ve been an officer for 22 years, and never had anybody help me like that. You don’t want to mess with that grandmother.

—Billy Aime, sheriff’s deputy

felt so at peace, completely safe, even though I am only 5 foot 2. As I got closer, I saw blood and hair smeared on the cruiser. And then I noticed that both men had a hand on the officer’s gun, so I grabbed the suspect’s hand on the gun, twisted his arm behind him and jumped on his back.

Officer Billy, who is 6 foot 6, fell on me, and soon we were all down on the ground. I heard sirens, and when I looked up, I saw backup coming.

I know some people who say they would never have done what I did, but that is them and not me. One thing about me is that I’m not worried what people think of me. All I’m worried about is what God thinks of me. —as told to Renee Bacher

JAMES ‘BUD’ GARVEY

## Pulled Man From a Burning Car

In November 2016, Garvey, then 76, rescued a man from a fiery wreck near Imler, Pennsylvania.

**I** OWN A RACE CAR museum 82 miles from where I live. My wife and I go up every Saturday. One morning we were buzzing along the interstate when I saw smoke ahead. There was fire in a ditch, and I said to my wife, “That looks like a car burning.” I got out and scrambled down. There was a fellow sitting in the middle of a burning car! The woods were on fire and flames were all over the front of the vehicle. I hollered to him to come on out. He very calmly said, “I can’t.” The way he said it was eerie. I knew I was his only hope. I tried the door, but it was jammed.

Just then the front tire blew out and sent me flying backward into the brush. I staggered to the

car and saw the guy was losing consciousness. The fire was going to town. I crawled in the window and braced my feet against the door and got ahold of him under his arms—and he

came out halfway but was still stuck. I rolled him to the side, and whatever was holding him broke loose. I was still in pretty good shape at 76, and dragged him up the hill to the road. My wife’s a retired RN, and she kept him calm until the state police came.

I drove race cars. As an amateur pilot, I was in two airplane crashes. One time I landed in a tree and had to climb out. So you can say this was instinct based on a lifetime of experience. Mostly, I knew I couldn’t leave this man, who turned out to have a couple of young kids, there to burn.

### MY HERO

When Bud got to the car, I knew he wasn’t going to stop until he got this man to safety. He did it almost automatically. I’m so proud of him.

—Nancy Garvey, Bud’s wife





**STEPHEN WILLEFORD**

## Chased Down a Mass Shooter

*In November 2017, Willeford, 55, wounded a gunman who had just murdered several of his neighbors in Sutherland Springs, Texas.*

**I WAS IN MY BEDROOM**, relaxing before work on a Sunday morning, when my daughter came in and said she heard gunshots coming from the First Baptist Church down the street. I went and got my firearm from the safe and ran outside without even putting on shoes, because I knew every pop, pop, pop might represent somebody's life.

The shooter came out of the church wearing black tactical gear, saw me right away and started shooting at me. I returned fire. He hit the truck I was using for cover. He hit the car behind me. He hit the house behind me.

I'm a former NRA instructor and competitive shooter, and I'm good with

rifles because I trained during most of my adult life. I've never been in a situation like this and never wanted to be. But let me tell you, those many years of training made a difference. Using a holographic red-dot scope, I hit the shooter in a small area not covered by his bulletproof vest. He still managed to get away. He got into his vehicle and fired another couple of rounds through his side window.

Someone in a pickup truck at a stop sign witnessed the whole thing, and I tapped on his window and said, "We gotta catch this guy." I got in, and the chase was on. As a Christian, I really felt that God was protecting us and guiding us. We were driving just as

fast as this guy's truck would move, and we caught up to the shooter. He pulled over and stopped, and as I started to open the door, the shooter accelerated again and hit a road sign before going over a curb into a field. That's when the police—say he shot himself; at that point we had already called 911, and the police arrived five minutes later. Twenty-six people were tragically killed, but the survivors can rest easy knowing this guy won't ever hurt anyone again.

People hear this story and think I'm some kind of Rambo. I'm not. I'm the biggest marshmallow in the world. I'm the first person to cry at a sad movie. But you don't mess with my neighbors, my friends or my family.

### **MY HERO**

Me? I was terrified. But I knew right away that Dad was going to step in. It's not in him to hide. That's just not who he is. —  
*Stephanie Willeford,*  
*daughter*