

Prayer helps Wisconsin police chief face trauma like recent school hostage ordeal

GREEN BAY, Wis. - It's a call no police officer wants to get: a hostage situation at a school.

Yet, that's exactly the call that came to Marinette Police Chief Jeff Skorik Nov. 29.

"Obviously, when the call came in that there was a student at the school holding a classroom hostage with a gun, your first reaction is 'No, it can't be true,' " said Skorik, a father of two grown daughters. "Then you kind of go into a reaction mode."

But to the list of his official reactions, Skorik, a 31-year police veteran, added another: prayer.

"At the time," he said, "you say a quiet prayer to yourself that everyone gets out of this safe and that you make the right decision so that everyone comes out of this alive."

On that Monday afternoon, Marinette High School sophomore Samuel Hengel, age 15, took 25 students and his teacher hostage for nearly seven hours. Police eventually stormed the classroom after hearing gunshots, and then Hengel shot himself.

He died the next day at a Green Bay hospital.

No one else was physically injured, and reasons as to why the incident happened in the first place remain unanswered.

Skorik said that the close-knit community, which includes about 35,000 in Marinette and nearby Menominee, Mich., remains saddened by the loss of Hengel, a well-liked student who had been active in the Boy Scouts. Many attended the funeral for Hengel Dec. 5, including Skorik. He said he wanted to pay his respects to the Hengel

family.

"My feelings are still very strong, being a parent and trying to imagine what Sam's parents are going through, to try to come to terms with what Sam did," he told The Compass, Green Bay's diocesan newspaper, in a telephone interview Dec. 17. "No one's really able to identify why this tragedy happened."

"This will not be forgotten in our community," he added. "I just hope that people can come away from it with the feeling that all life is precious and that we're sad whenever we lose any one from our community."

Skorik became a Catholic after he got married. He joined Holy Family Parish when he and his wife, Mary, were wed in 1984. He went through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in 1986. Today, every Thursday morning from 6 to 7, he attends eucharistic adoration at the parish. His wife does the same for an hour each Saturday evening.

After the shooting, Mary offered to go in her husband's place Dec. 1, so he could get an extra hour of sleep. Skorik hadn't had much of that since the Nov. 29 incident. He hadn't even been home until the evening of the 30th.

But he declined her offer, feeling that "it was appropriate that I go to adoration."

Looking back at Nov. 29, Skorik realizes it was a harrowing day for everyone: the students, their parents, their teacher, Valerie Burd – and the officers on the scene, some of whom have children in that school or nieces and nephews the same age as Hengel.

Skorik said that one of the most important calls he received in the aftermath came from his pastor, Father Joe Dorner, on Nov. 30.

"He called my house and said that he'd been praying for me and all the people involved," Skorik said, "and just wanted to extend his concern and let me know if there was ever a time if he could be of service to me or any officers or family members he was available."

The priest's sentiments have been echoed by many Holy Family parishioners.

They've sent cards and letters to the chief and have sought him out to "tell me they appreciate the work the police department has done," he said, "offered themselves that if there is ever a time I need to talk, anything they can do to help they are there."

Skorik calls it being part of a big family.

He said that the events have deepened his faith, even though he had learned, early in his career, that "when confronted with seemingly insurmountable challenges, someone who has faith in their life will come to that point (of prayer) very quickly."

However, since Nov. 29, he has found himself turning to God just a bit more.

"I guess before this," Skorik said, "I would make an effort to get to Mass, but I've just recommitted myself (now.) I haven't missed Mass since this incident. I just really feel that the church has been supportive to me in my spiritual life and all the things that go on, and with Christmas and the holidays, you really have to think, at the end of the day, about the things that are important to you: your faith and your family."