

‘Unknown’ Hero Makes Sacrifice for 22 Children on Bus

What does a hero look like?

Is a hero one of comic book lore, who flies into danger, cape whipping in the wind, muscles bulging, as citizens watch in awe-struck wonder?

Perhaps heroes are more often found singing on a stage, playing in a stadium or starring in movies as millions of adoring fans fawn over them for their extreme giftedness.

Or perhaps, just perhaps, a true hero doesn’t even know he or she is a hero.

Maybe true heroes are so selfless and focused on compassionately loving others, that to even consider themselves heroes would cause them profound embarrassment.

On Tuesday, Jan. 29, 66-year-old Charles (“Chuck” to his many friends) Poland Jr. was doing what he loved—driving a busload of “his kids” home from their Midland City, Ala., schools. Chuck didn’t know it, but in just a handful of minutes, the litmus test of hero definition would literally be handed to him.

Chuck and his wife of more than 40 years, Jan, were longtime members of Grace Assembly of God in nearby Newton, Ala. And this rural bus route was not just a job to Chuck; it was a ministry he had enjoyed for the past four years—picking up and delivering kids safely to and from school each day.

Chuck’s pastor, Ray Layton, says there was no doubt how much he cared for the kids.

“He really loved those kids on the school bus,” Layton says. “In fact, a little boy, named Ethan, was really afraid to ride the school bus, so Chuck always saved the seat right behind him so he could talk to Ethan and assure him and help ease his fears. Jan told me recently that Chuck had said he felt his little buddy—what he called Ethan—was finally getting comfortable riding the bus.”

Layton says the Polands were also a gift to his small, but friendly church.

“Chuck and Jan were members of the choir and were usually one of the first ones to be at church on Sunday morning, Sunday night or any other time the church doors were open—and one of the last to leave,” Layton says. “He enjoyed the fellowship. He was warm, compassionate and anything we needed help with at the church, he was ready to volunteer.”

Layton explains that no matter what words of praise he bestowed on Chuck, it really couldn’t be enough.

“He was a humble man, a caring man, who, when he spoke, spoke with wisdom,” Layton says. “I can’t add to his life. He just really loved the Lord, that was Brother Chuck, that was just him.”

But Chuck wasn’t just all about the “warm fuzzies” of being surrounded by a loving church family and being a “surrogate” father to about two dozen children each day. No, Chuck lived out what he believed—demonstrating the love and compassion of Christ, even when the warm and fuzzy was more of a “hard and thorny.”

When Jimmy Lee Dykes moved to the community, it quickly became obvious to neighbors that he was a hard-nosed loner, who seemed to have a survivalist mentality. He did nothing to ingratiate himself to his neighbors—in fact, he frequently threatened them and their property.

But Chuck didn't see Dykes as an enemy, but rather a soul to be pointed toward Christ. He did his best to befriend Dykes. In apparent appreciation, Dykes created a place on his property for Chuck to be able to turn the school bus around more easily.

So, when Dykes approached the school bus that Tuesday afternoon, Chuck was not overly concerned. Why, just that morning he had brought over some homemade jelly and fresh eggs to Jimmy Lee. But when Dykes stepped on the bus stairs and handed him a note, Chuck probably knew something was wrong.

Few people face that moment when death looks them in the face and gives them a choice—live or die? Fewer still pass the test heroically as the instinct to survive is powerful.

Although no one is certain of the words Chuck responded with to Dykes' note—now backed by a loaded gun—demanding two children between the ages of 6 and 8 be given to him, Chuck's refusal was clear. No one was going to come on to his bus and take any of the kids—not his kids!

"Some people have called Chuck a hero, and deservedly so," Layton says quietly. "But what Chuck was most of all, was a true Christian. He understood what love and sacrifice was all about."

Soon after Dykes stepped onto the bus steps, he fired one warning shot into the bus roof and then four more shots directed at Chuck, with the first of the four piercing Chuck's heart. Dykes, apparently surprised by Chuck's dogged refusal, then grabbed little Ethan, who had passed out with the shock of the shooting, and took off. Things were no longer going according to Dykes' plan as he left behind 21 shocked and terrified children.

"If Chuck hadn't given his life to protect those children, there's no telling what could have happened," Layton says.

As Chuck entered eternity, a few miles away, Michael Senn, pastor of Midway Assembly of God in Midland City, was attending a funeral service. As he and his wife headed toward the gravesite, they suddenly got a call from a neighbor—were they okay? There were swarms of emergency vehicles in the Destiny Church parking lot and shots had been fired.

“We live on 12 acres,” Senn explains. “We live on one end and on the other side, Destiny Church (a building Midway Church rents out to another congregation) is located. Dykes lives right next to Destiny Church and our 16-year-old son was home alone—and we weren’t sure what was going on or where the shooter was.”

After making sure their son was okay, Pastor Senn headed to Destiny Church. His church, Midway, was just down the street with their activities building/youth center just across the street from Destiny Church and Dykes’ home.

“I was on the scene about 35 minutes after it happened,” Senn says. “There were still a lot of kids there, and I was able to talk and pray with some of them.”

Senn recalls one 13-year-old boy being particularly distraught, with some school officials approaching Senn and asking him to talk with the boy. Senn soon learned that the boy was a friend of little Ethan. The boy’s mom would sometimes watch Ethan at their home.

“We went inside the church and talked,” Senn says. “He explained to me what happened—he had seen the whole thing and was really upset about Ethan being taken. I was able to talk with him and then pray with him, but I could tell he was really traumatized by what he had just seen.”

With emergency vehicles, police officers, FBI, snipers and bomb squad personnel swarming the area, the media was soon present in full force as well. At first, Senn allowed the media to use the youth center as its base, but then the FBI

requested its use, with Senn agreeing.

Senn says that he was originally asked to gather ministers to counsel with the kids at the schools in Midland City, but as classes were canceled for an extended period, professional counselors from around the country came in to assist when school resumed.

However, as Senn was in constant contact with officials, the media—which included every major national and local network—frequently came to him for interviews.

“I always had an opportunity during the interviews to encourage people to come together and pray for Ethan, focusing on Ethan’s safety and return to his family,” Senn says. “And Sheriff Wally Olson, every time he went to the media, also asked people to pray.”

The church property also became a key to the rescue of Ethan. Behind the church’s youth building, authorities built the mock set-up of Dykes underground shelter to practice their rescue attempt.

While Senn was working with the media and officials, urging people to pray, Layton was ministering to his congregation and Chuck’s wife, Jan. Layton says when he and his wife visited Jan in the hospital—as she was taken there when she learned of Chuck’s sacrifice—they had the opportunity to comfort another young woman, as in a small town (2,300), one person can impact a significant percentage of his or her community.

“When we came in and asked for the Poland family, the young woman at the counter pointed down the hall and then began to cry,” Layton recalls. “My wife went to her and the young woman explained that Chuck used to be her bus driver.”

Senn says that through the experience, the entire community has a greater realization of the needs that exist in the community and are more conscious of their relationship with

God.

“Evil has no geographical boundaries or age categories,” Senn says. “Evil is everywhere. I believe the enemy is coming against us by attacking what is close to us—our children. We need to be constantly aware of our relationship with God and be praying, praying God’s protection for our children and our families.”

After being held captive for seven days, Ethan was rescued and Dykes was killed in a surprise raid by authorities on the bunker. Layton says that just prior to Ethan’s rescue, he and a pastor friend had sat together and prayed once more for Ethan’s safe release. Layton says the news of Ethan’s rescue was like a refreshing to his spirit, though he felt sorry that Dykes had lost his life.

“But sometimes you bring things upon yourself,” Layton says of Dykes, “and I believe he did.”

In reflection, Layton recalls that the Sunday before Chuck’s death, he had asked him a question.

“I asked Chuck what he would like to see God do in this church and in this community,” Layton says. “He told me, ‘I’d like to see this house [the church] filled. I believe that would please the Lord.’”

In one sense, Chuck’s desire was fulfilled to overflowing. Layton said that they had to hold Chuck’s funeral, not at the church, but at the Ozark (Alabama) Civic Center, with an estimated 1,000 (or more) attending.

“We had scores of bus drivers, teachers, principals, officers even people from Washington, D.C., at the funeral,” says Layton, who officiated the service. “The family asked me to take the opportunity to preach God’s Word as they realized not everyone attending would be Christians or even know who the Lord was—that I should present Scripture for those people, so

that's what I did."

Some people have questioned why it had to be such a loving person like Chuck who lost his life in this tragedy. It's a difficult question, but the answer may simply be, God knew that on Jan. 29, on a school bus in Midland City, Ala., 22 kids would need a real hero.