

Sergeant shoots for his life

Gentry Thorpe uses ‘ballistic therapy’ to overcome trauma

By SHEILA HAGAR
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

MILTON-FREEWATER — In his younger life, Gentry Thorpe easily could have been on the other side of the bars on the day he was knocked senseless in 2019.

The Milton-Freewater man and Washington State Penitentiary sergeant was one of two officers pummeled, punched and rendered unconscious by a large, angry and mentally ill inmate that August day as they worked inside the prison’s mental health unit.

Since then, Thorpe has lived with the physical and emotional results of the brutal attack. He said the best medicine he’s found, after his family’s support and love, is through his joy of and involvement with precision target shooting.

Such is his passion for the sport and for sharing it with others that last year, Thorpe established a company, Black Hammer Tactical LLC, which hosts precision shooting matches for others who enjoy the competitive hobby.

Shooting a .22 rifle helps everything, settling anxiety and restoring calm, Thorpe said.

“I call it ballistic therapy,” he said.

Life preservers

At one time, firearms stood a good chance of becoming a serious negative in Thorpe’s life.

Thorpe said in his hometown of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, he grew up running the streets, despite his grandmother’s efforts as she raised him and his siblings for much of their childhood. “I’m from a Black neighborhood. I’m from the inner city,” he said, adding his mom and dad had their own challenges rising from the environment around them.

Joining the military right after high school meant rescue from the land mines ahead he could clearly see, including gang affiliation, Thorpe said.

After serving seven years in the U.S. Army, he returned to Fort Lauderdale



Gentry Thorpe documents the action at a February 2022 rimfire shooting event at the East End Rod & Gun Club range in Milton-Freewater.

Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

and, to his own dismay, the street life.

There is every likelihood Thorpe would have become another statistic reflecting outcomes for young Black men living in such circumstances had it not been for family.

Thorpe’s older brother also had joined the Army as a young man and ended up stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma.

“Then he came to Walla Walla,” Thorpe said. “He talked me into coming up here and going to work at the prison. I had to look Walla Walla up; I only knew the name from a Looney Tunes cartoon.”

Thorpe spent his last dollars to come for an interview. Assured a job would be his, he flew home again to make the move.

“My mom gave me the money to drive up here. I had \$19 to my name when I got to Walla Walla. I lived with my brother until I got on my feet.”

That was in 2008. By 2009, Thorpe had installed his family, including four children, in their new hometown and continued to focus on building a career as a corrections officer.

The work suited him. At the time, he said, the prison had a “paramilitary” atmosphere that was attractive for its structure and clear expectations.

“I got promoted fairly quickly because I was good at my job. Everything was good. We had just bought a house.”

Thorpe, 42, had been a shooting enthusiast for years, but coming to this area brought his hobby into sharper focus.

“I met some white dudes who took me out shooting,” he said, laughing. “It was like love at first sight. I had never just shot for fun.”

By 2016, Thorpe was hosting competitive matches and teaching classes, with an emphasis on precision shooting with .22-caliber rifles.

He first informally started Black Hammer to teach people long-range shooting skills, primarily using the range at East End Rod & Gun Club in Milton-Freewater, Thorpe said.

He teaches both rimfire and centerfire shooting, but this year the focus is on the simpler rimfire model to make the sport less intimidating and less expensive.

Thorpe even supplies a rifle and ammunition to those who want to try it out, a courtesy he calls “the Black Hammer experience.”

The business now presents seasonal shooting matches. Thorpe is hosting a five-part, competitive winter series that will culminate in his first two-day event on April 9 and 10.

In February, attendance at the third session was robust with about 40 adults and a handful of children moving through the course, vying to strike their targets.

Brandon Cadwell, who runs logistics and coaches shooting for Black Hammer, hustled here and there to help groups get lined out, a

broad smile welcoming all.

“This year, we got affiliated with the Precision Rifle (Series), meaning some of these shooters are showing up to earn points for that,” Cadwell said.

On this sunny day, that included groups like the team from Lead Farm Gun Range in Prosser.

Lee Stebar, from La Grande, said Lead Farm members have been faithfully traveling to Milton-Freewater to participate in the Black Hammer series.

“This is pure enjoyment,” Stebar said, waving a hand toward the range, explaining the challenge of multiple targets in multiple positions creates a happy tension as Lead Farm shooters try for the highest point count possible.

“It gets intense, and that’s half the pleasure.”

Down from Othello, Washington, David Valdez was attending his first competitive match after meeting other shooters at another event. It was a good way to spend a Saturday outdoors with new friends for not a whole lot of money, Valdez said.

“The .22 is cheaper, and it teaches the fundamentals of shooting.”

Victor Mendoza from Hermiston agreed.

“It’s just flat out fun, a good way to practice for relatively low cost. And this is a really nice range.”

Duc Luu, a dentist at the Walla Walla prison, has known Gentry Thorpe for years and relishes being part of the Black Hammer crew.

Events like this, which attract families and friends, “puts shooting in a positive light,” Luu said.

“We all value the Second Amendment. We love the community support. This is very organized and very safe.”

Target shooting under these circumstances can be a good youth activity, all the better for being an outdoor sport, Luu said.

Jimmy Cadwell, 6, could be inclined to agree. The Assumption Catholic School kindergartner participates in the “Mighty Mini” division for shooters age 10 and under, with a focus on fun over competition.

Nonetheless, when asked what he enjoys about the sport, Jimmy shot out an answer: “Winning.”

Winning at recovery

Gentry and his wife, Diedra Thorpe, now fully understand there is more than one way to win at target shooting.

The residual brain trauma from the inmate attack left Gentry Thorpe with short-term memory loss, cognitive issues, mental fatigue and poor concentration. Vertigo and migraines plague the corrections officer while

periods of dark mood and flashes of anger impact the rest of the family.

“My psychologist tells me that’s part of the brain injury. I was super mellow before,” he said.

His wife has been a trooper, working as a para-educator at an elementary school while pursuing a master’s degree in teaching and picking up the slack on the bad days, he said.

It was Diedra Thorpe who insisted her husband, a self-proclaimed “non pet person,” get the service dog health providers had recommended. Thus, “Blu” has joined the family.

When Thorpe was first injured, he “absolutely” couldn’t go out to shoot, he remembered.

“I couldn’t leave the house. I couldn’t do anything.”

About the time his psychologist suggested he try returning to his favorite sport, his speech therapist recommended the same. As Thorpe was able to return to his hobby, the mechanics of the sport retrained the focus and stamina he’d lost, much to his relief.

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thorpe took time to promote Black Hammer in every fashion he could.

“It gave me an opportunity to post my stuff on social media, and more people who were sitting at home and doing nothing saw it. I just flooded social media and tried to break the internet with all of it.”

His wife used her degree in graphic arts to help with logo and marketing efforts, he said.

As the response started rolling in, Thorpe felt his depression falling away.

“People came, they showed up and they went shooting. And I got to socialize again. I was able to leave the house.”

He plans to pay the medicine forward, he said.

“I’ve just tried to share what helps me with other people. I want them to have that same feeling.”

BMCC president orders a ‘full institutional review’

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — In the wake of negative feedback from students and with budget cuts on the horizon, Blue Mountain Community College President Mark Browning is planning a “full institutional review” of the college.

Browning made his announcement in a March 2 president’s report to the BMCC Board of Education.

“We need to hear from those who we strive to serve that in some ways, we are not meeting our own standards, we are not delivering on our promise to be Students First,” he wrote. “This is a stark wake up call. We must do better. And improvement starts with the difficult work of internal examination and review, each of us individually, as departments, as buildings, as a campus.”

Since starting in the position last year, Browning said he’s been speaking

with students to gauge their thoughts on the college and its staff. As time went on their comments have become more candid and have included feedback that the college doesn’t always feel like a welcoming environment.

But student sentiments aren’t the only reason Browning wants a review. With enrollment continuing to erode, Blue Mountain expects to make more budget cuts following two previous rounds of staff reductions.

While BMCC gets audited each year like every other public agency in the state, Browning said the review will take a wider look at the school’s operations and programs and provide recommendations on how to improve them. Browning said all of these measures are taken with the idea of setting BMCC back on the path of growth.

“We can make budget

adjustments so that we balance our budget, but we have to make sure we are making those adjustments such that we have resources available to be proactive and grow versus just hanging on,” he said. “I’m not interested in hanging on. I’m interested in growing and being vital and thriving.”

Although Browning said the college is planning on moving forward with the review, it’s still in the early stages. He said the review will be conducted by a third party and he’s already talking with a few potential companies about taking on the task. He doesn’t yet have a timeline for when the review will begin and end, and whether it will be completed by the time the college approves a budget for the next fiscal year.

While the review comes at a tough time for the college, Browning still struck an optimistic tone about the future of BMCC.



Browning

“I don’t want to paint a picture that everything is doom and gloom, because it’s certainly not that,” he said. “We’re doing a number of really good things. We’re going to be coming up here in a couple of months on a time of graduation, where students are going to be walking across the stage, getting their degree and certificate, and they’re gonna have a whole new world out in front of them. So let’s make sure we celebrate that for the good that we’re doing, with a recognition that there’s always room for improvement.”

TEN DEPOT STREET

“Real Food for the People”

Open Fri-Sun 5pm-8pm

Take-out Menu Updated Weekly

www.tendepotstreet.com
541-963-8766
tendepotstreet@gmail.com

An Independent Insurance Agency

Reed & ASSOCIATES

Trusted Insurance Help Since 1994

Get Trusted, Friendly, Expert Medicare Insurance Help

MEDICARE

10106 North C St. • Island City
541-975-1364 • Toll Free 1-866-282-1925
www.reed-insurance.net

Mobile Service Outstanding Computer Repair

Fast & Reliable Call or Text 24/7

Dale Bogardus 541-297-5831

Stay up-to-date with Microsoft’s most advanced operating system to date, Windows 11

Desktops and laptops in stock
Or upgrade yours today for the best security!

House calls (let me come to you!) Drop Offs & Remote Services are Available

All credit cards accepted

Union County Business Grants Available

The 2022 Union County Business Assistance Grant Program is currently accepting applications from small businesses financially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible applicants may receive up to \$10,000.

Applications, eligibility requirements, and additional information is available on the Union County website at www.union-county.org or by calling 541-963-1001. Completed and signed applications packets must be received via email at bizgrant@union-county.org or hand delivered to 1106 K Avenue by 12:00 noon on Friday, April 1, 2022.

This grant program is being made available due to federal funding received from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund.

WE MAKE IT EASY with an online application

It’s easy to apply for a home mortgage loan at Allied Mortgage Resource. Simply go to lagrandemannmortgage.com and complete an application form. After we process your request, we will contact you to meet with one of our financial officers. We make it easy for you to start the process of owning your own home.

1429 Adams Ave La Grande, OR 541-962-7557

ALLIED MORTGAGE RESOURCE
A Division of Mann Mortgage, LLC #2550