

## "Have Gun, Will Not Fear it Anymore"

Bleeding and weakened from the bullet wound in her chest, Susan Gonzalez aimed her husband's .22-caliber pistol, the one she hated, and emptied it into one of the robbers who had burst through the front door of her rural Jacksonville home.

Those shots ended the life of one robber, led to a life prison term for another and became an epiphany for Gonzalez, a 41-year-old mother of five who runs a photography studio.

Gonzalez had always feared guns, never wanted a gun and argued with her husband, Mike, to please not keep guns in their home.

"I hated guns, all of them," she said. "I was that scared of them that I didn't want them around."

That all changed that terror-filled night nearly three years ago when Susan Gonzalez fought for her life inside her family's home near Jacksonville International Airport.

She and her husband, 43, no longer argue about guns, and she goes almost nowhere without her holstered Taurus .38 Special. She sits with it while watching television and takes it outside to do yardwork.

She joined advocacy groups such as Women Against Gun Control and the Second Amendment Sisters.

And she became a vocal opponent of gun control, traveling to Washington in May to meet with President Clinton and counter-organizers of the Million Mom March, which organized a huge Mother's Day rally to support gun control legislation. She recently taped a segment scheduled to air on ABC-TV's 20/20 in the fall. And this month, she was filmed by a British TV crew for a documentary on Americans and guns.

Gonzalez's story is naturally compelling because she was anti-gun and because she successfully defended herself against an armed intruder after being shot herself, said Janalee Tobias, founder and president of Women Against Gun Control.

"She actually fired a gun," Tobias said. In most cases where potential victims protect themselves, Tobias said, a person is able to scare off an intruder simply by displaying a weapon.

Gonzalez never imagined herself advocating gun owners' rights. She still weeps at the memory of taking a man's life.

"I live every day knowing I had to shoot that boy," she said.

But she said she thinks it's important that stories like hers get told.

"Two and a half years ago I felt just like all them other women [at the Million Mom March]," she said. "You hear about criminals with guns, and you hear about kids committing suicide with guns, but you never hear about the self-defense aspect."

### **'I knew I was dead'**

The 42 bullet holes police counted in the Gonzalez home the morning of Aug. 2, 1997, are stark evidence of the sheer terror the couple endured on the night that changed their lives.

The night seemed to be winding down as any other. While Mike Gonzalez slept, his wife sat on the couch watching television and waiting for their 18-year-old son to arrive home from a friend's house, where he had been playing video games.

Susan Gonzalez remembers hearing the doorknob jiggle about 12:40 a.m. She thought to herself as she walked toward the door, "Wow, he's early."

Suddenly the door flew open and two masked men burst into the doublewide wearing gloves and camouflage jackets and waving guns. One of them ordered Susan Gonzalez to lie down, but she ran. He chased her back to the master bedroom, where she woke her husband and tried to hold the door shut. She was shot in the chest.

"It burned like a fire going through me," she said.

As her husband, 43, wrestled with the two robbers in the living room, Susan Gonzalez dialed 911, told the operator they were being shot, gave her address and hung up. She then grabbed her husband's Ruger .22 from a drawer in the headboard and, fearing she would hit her husband by mistake, fired several shots over the robbers' heads to scare them off.

### **It didn't work.**

"One came towards me firing, and I ran," she said. "After running to my bedroom, the intruder didn't follow me all the way . . . because he now knew I had a gun also."

She peered out from her bedroom doorway and saw one of the gunmen, Raymond Waters Jr., crouched near her refrigerator. She crept along the wall, sneaked up behind him and emptied the Ruger, hitting him twice with her seven or eight remaining bullets. The other gunman, Robert Walls, then shot Susan Gonzalez, now out of ammunition, as she retreated to the bedroom again.

"I was standing in my closet asking for forgiveness of my sins, because I knew I was dead," she recalled.

### **Reality sets in**

Walls fled from the house but returned when he found the robbers' getaway driver had left. He put a gun to Susan Gonzalez's head and demanded the keys to the couple's truck. As he sped off, the truck ran over Waters, who had staggered outside.

Walls, 24, is serving five life prison terms for second-degree felony murder, armed robbery, armed burglary and two counts of attempted first-degree murder. Louie T. Wright, 27, the getaway driver, pleaded guilty to robbery and was sentenced to five years.

Susan and Mike Gonzalez, each shot twice during the gunbattle, were treated at area hospitals. She required lung surgery. His injuries were less serious, and he went home in three days.

Nancy Hwa, a spokeswoman for the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, was reluctant to criticize Gonzalez.

"Every incident is different," she said. "In this particular case, she certainly was justified using whatever means necessary to defend herself."

But the compelling story obscures the fact that "incidences like Ms. Gonzalez's are very rare," Hwa said, citing statistics that show firearms are far less likely to be used

in self-defense than in suicides, accidental shootings or homicides involving members of the same household. And, she said, the center believes having a handgun escalates the potential for violence.

"People have to weigh the risk of losing a TV, jewelry or whatever vs. losing their life," Hwa said.

The statistics don't matter to Susan Gonzalez.

"Reality set in when I was shot," she said, "to the point where I realized why my husband and others had guns for self-defense."

### **Living in fear**

In April, Mike and Susan Gonzalez traveled to New York to be interviewed for a TV talk show pilot with 20/20's John Stossel. It was the first time since the robbery she had been without her gun for any significant length of time, and, as she and her husband dined at a steakhouse, she got scared about walking back to their hotel.

"I told my husband, 'Take one of their steak knives,'" she said.

At home, they live behind burglar bars. The doors and windows are always locked. And there's the ever-present pistol.

"That's sad to have to live that way, but it's the only way I can feel comfortable," Susan Gonzalez said.

Her fears were only heightened when she and her husband were crime victims again in March. Burglars used an ax from their shed to break down the burglar bars on the back door while they weren't home. Among the items stolen -- the Ruger .22 she used to shoot Waters.

Police are still recovering weapons taken in the burglary -- a 9mm turned up in Virginia last week -- but the Ruger remains missing.

As a mother of five, all now grown, Susan Gonzalez said she understands the gun control lobby's concerns about children getting access to guns. She questions some positions taken by the National Rifle Association. Neither she nor her husband are members.

"I think they're a little over-the-top, but I think . . . they're doing it [because] they're afraid once it starts, then it's not going to stop," she said, referring to legislation limiting gun owners' rights. "They're trying to preserve Second Amendment rights."

She said she believes in gun locks or unloading weapons that aren't being used. But she also believes people should have the right to keep an unlocked gun close by to protect themselves -- like she did.

"I feel I have the right to self-defense," she said, "and I feel that other people do, too."