

Indiana School Reinstates Student After Public Outcry

We have reported in past editions about some U.S. school districts that have modified their “zero-tolerance” policies with respect to possession of knives on school grounds. Rather than automatically suspending and/or expelling the offending student who may have brought a knife to school, they have elected to review each situation on a case-by-case basis.

Most school districts tend to take a very hard line on the subject. One such case was reported in the April 3, 2006 edition of the Indianapolis [Indiana] Star. Reporter William J. Booher filed the story and we also interviewed him by phone. “Within two days after the story ran,” Booher said, “we and the school district received more than 400 emails. Some came from as far away as Israel.”

Why did the story generate such a large amount of feedback? You decide.

According to the story, Elliot Voge, 14, an eighth-grader at Stonybrook Middle School in Ohio’s Warren Township, mistakenly brought a Swiss Army knife to school. He had been using his 10-year-old brother’s knife a day earlier to whittle on some wood. Then he put the knife in his pocket and forgot about it.

He didn’t remember it until he was dropped off by a friend’s mother in front of the school the next day, March 3. He reportedly claimed it was cool weather so he shoved his hands into his jacket pocket to keep them warm. That’s when he realized he still had the knife.

According to Elliot, he went straight to the office inside and handed the knife to Teri Donahue, the school’s treasurer, and told her he had brought it to school by mistake. Donahue then reported him to the school’s principal, Jimmy Meadows, who suspended Elliot for the maximum 10 school days as allowed by law and recommended Elliot be expelled. (A confidential expulsion hearing had also been scheduled for April 10 but, as we will explain, that hearing was never held.)

Once they learned of the incident and the principal’s response, Elliot’s mother, Elizabeth Voge-Wehrheim, and his stepfather, Frank Wehrheim, hired Indianapolis attorney

Lawrence T. Newman to represent the student.

Booher quotes Newman as saying, “This young man made the most responsible choice under any policy possible. But they are treating him as the most irresponsible student under the circumstances.”

Jeff Swensson, Warren Township Schools’ associate superintendent, is reported to have said that a principal in Indiana has the discretion to suspend a student for virtually any reason for up to 10 school days by state law but can only recommend expulsion.

Principal Meadows, in his expulsion-recommendation summary, wrote: “Realizing that the knife was an item he should not have on school property, Elliot immediately went into the main office and handed the knife to our school treasurer.... Throughout the entire investigation and student due-process, Elliott (sic) was a model student.”

We should also note that Elliot had never been cited for any behavioral or disciplinary issues in his eight years of school life. In fact, after the knife incident, he had received notice that he would be recommended for advanced placement courses in English, science and social studies for his freshman year at Warren Central High School.

In the meantime, his mother contended that his grades had already been negatively affected.

In the story, the family’s attorney reportedly said school officials’ actions send students the wrong message. “Their message is to be dishonest, take more chances,” Newman reportedly said.

He said Elliot could not be worse off at this point in the eyes of the school system than if he had taken the knife to school intentionally, kept it with him in school where it could pose a risk and just happened to get caught. “What’s the incentive?” Newman said of students who want to do the right thing. We might add that Elliot could have also chosen to walk off down the street and toss the knife in a garbage can, even though it belonged to his brother, where someone may have found it and who wasn’t trained to properly and safely use it as a tool.

Warren Township Schools’ code of conduct prohibits both the possession of a weapon and requires students to report knowledge of weapons or threats of violence to the school administration. Weapons are defined as guns and other firearms, knives, blades, Chinese throwing stars, brass knuckles, stun guns, look-alike weapons, paint guns, explosives and ammunition.

Newman added that Elliot “didn’t want to keep it (the knife) on his person. “The school is saying, ‘Don’t make this responsible choice.’”

That is the substance of the story that ran under the following headline ... “Boy turns in knife but may still be expelled ... Family says Warren Township eighth-grader is being punished too harshly for doing the right thing.”

As we indicated above, Booher’s story struck a responsive chord around the world. The reported 400 emails and/or phone calls that the story generated within about two days caused the Warren Township Schools to rethink their actions in the Elliot Voge case. According to Booher, “they decided that Elliot had acted responsibly and that they wouldn’t punish him further. The expulsion hearing was cancelled.”

The Moral of the Story ...

While the following commentary does not reflect the official views of the American Knife & Tool Institute or its individual members, the Elliot Voge case points out a number of issues that members should be aware of.

First of all, when we were informed of the original story about Elliot Voge, we contacted William J. Booher, the reporter. Our intent was to get permission to reprint the story in its entirety. As I explained to him, we had run other stories in the past about school districts that had decided to look at “zero-tolerance” in light of larger issues.

The fact that the original story generated such a huge response from readers indicates that the typical “person on the street” believed that Elliot was being punished for doing the right thing. (However, we do not know how many emails and/or letters supported the school district but it must have

been a small number or the school district would have stuck to its original plan to expel Elliot.) Granted, he came to school with a knife, but who among us has not done something similar? How often have you put your hand in a jacket or pants pocket and discovered a lost or misplaced item?

Schools have gotten increasing criticism for lack of discipline. So taking a tough stance on knife issues may help embattled districts and administrators prove to local citizens that the district can be the last line of defense against “moral decay.” Districts may have problems with low standardized test scores, cheating on tests, alcohol, drug and tobacco abuse, high drop-out rates and teen pregnancies, so if they can expel someone for a knife violation, they can claim to be doing something.

There is also the admitted deterrent value of catching and punishing a violator. Hence the old adage that “killing a chicken in public does get the attention of all the other chickens.”

When I talked to Mr. Booher, I complimented him on his reporting skills and about the fair result that publishing his story helped achieve. He accepted my thanks for the story that began ... “A Far-Eastside couple said they are stunned that a Warren Township Schools principal suspended their son...” Later in the story, Booher again uses the emotionally loaded term “stunned” when he says that “Elliot said he was stunned to feel the knife in his pocket.”

I explained to Mr. Booher that we would like to reprint the story because it does show that school boards can change their minds when reasonable, rational people point out that an injustice may be committed against a student such as Elliot.

At that point, Mr. Booher transferred me to his supervisor because “he is the person who would have to give permission to reprint the story.” When I explained to Mr. Booher’s supervising editor who I was and why I wanted to reprint this story in the AKTI Newsletter, I was told that I obviously had “an agenda” and that he was not sure that permission to reprint the story could be given. He also accused AKTI of “supporting companies who make money selling knives.” I indicated that our members ranged from individual knife owners to corporate members but that one of our four stated goals was to educate young people about the safe use of knives. (However, I did not point out that some newspapers write stories so they can sell more newspapers.)

I was then transferred to another department where, I was told, they would take my statement and walk me through an official request to reprint the story. However, the su-

pervising editor clearly left me with the impression that permission, if it ever came, would take a long time.

That’s when I decided to report the now-public story in my own words and to accurately quote whatever short passages I used directly.

First of all, Mr. Booher used the term “stunned” many times, yet he tried to posture that he was “only telling the story.” Since neither Elliot nor his parents were quoted as having said “stunned,” Mr. Booher could just as easily have chosen to use more neutral terms to describe their reaction. Words like “mildly dismayed, unhappy, or disappointed” come to mind. But those words are not as emotionally powerful as “stunned” and would not have produced a story strong enough to get all that reader feedback. Reporters are trained to use the power of words to position a story.

We are going to start reporting instances where knives have saved people’s lives. Please send us any reports or examples you may have.

Our goal at AKTI has always been to report on knife-related issues in a reasonable and rational manner, to be ethical journalists just as employees of the Indianapolis Star claim to be. And we will continue to do so.

We also want to announce we are going to start reporting instances where knives have saved people’s lives. Please send us any reports or examples you may have.

In the meantime, the Elliot Voge story should teach us a few things. First of all, reasonable and rational citizen response can make a difference. If those people who felt Elliot was being unfairly punished had kept quiet, he would now be expelled or his family would be facing a huge legal bill to fight the charges.

Secondly, there are school boards across the country that want to be fair and to send the right messages to their pupils. Encourage them to look at “zero-tolerance” with respect to knives on a case-by-case basis.

David D. Kowalski
AKTI Communications Coordinator

When “United 93” opened in theatres on April 28, I was one of the first in line to see it. Why? Because I have believed that since that fateful day, September 11, 2001, we have minimized the heroism of those passengers. We have also made it more difficult for such heroism to occur in the future. Before I expand on that, I want to “come clean” about who I am and what I believe.

The movie’s director, Paul Greengrass, gives us his view of the world, based on his research and assumptions. Here are my biases and assumptions.

I am a middle-aged (55+) white male who considers himself in pretty good shape. In fact, I recently earned a deputy black belt in Taekwondo and have trained 3-4 nights per week for at least one hour for the past 18 months. Even though I will earn a first-degree black belt in six months, I recognize how relatively unskilled I would be in the hand-to-hand combat the passengers faced. None of them are portrayed as having any martial arts training.

I have never been in a knife fight nor have I been mugged. I have never stabbed someone. I have never shot anyone nor been shot at. I have never mentally rehearsed throwing myself on a bomb and thereby saving scores of innocent victims around me.

I also confess that I frequently have secret doubts about the ability of commercial airplane pilots to get me safely back to earth. When a 747 quickly drops at 35,000 feet for even one second, my ability to stay calm and positive about the remainder of the flight has been seriously compromised.

Before any reviewer can be so arrogant as to judge the courage of any passengers on that flight, we should imagine the most stressful situation we’ve ever faced and multiply it by one thousand or one million.

Also I accept that director Greengrass researched the passengers, their supposed actions as revealed through reported comments made to family and friends via phone calls during the flight, and I acknowledge his timelines for other events and public actions taken that day.

There, I’ve revealed my assumptions and biases. I will let other reviewers expound on the technical expertise and artistry with which the film was made. I want to talk about the psychology of the tragedy.

I assume Greengrass accurately represents the age and gender of the passengers. United Flight 93 departed from Newark Airport, bound for San Francisco. The plane appears to be about 1/4 - 1/3 full. More than 1/2 the passengers are women ranging in apparent age from 20 to 70. Of the men on board, only about four are apparently between the ages of 20 to 40. Therefore, if this random collection

' Defines Heroism

of passengers were a tribe, only four of the men would have been in the prime "warrior" age group. Greengrass conveys that the bulk of the "heroic" action comes from them.

Greengrass thrusts the warrior-age males into the forefront of the passenger response. Quite frankly, a 20-year-old woman or even a 70-year-old one could have been a ringleader of the "take-back-the-plane" plan. The snippets of "real" phone calls we see replayed are mainly the "I-love-you" variety that give us no meaningful clues to who was at the head of the flight's "charge-them" brigade.

None of the passengers is identified by name so the director cannot be accused of portraying a certain individual as not-heroic.

The movie matches the real time of that morning very well. While Flight 93 is loading, taxiing and taking off, we see one of the three earlier flights crashing into the World Trade

Where did that leave passengers on Flight 93? On their own.

Center or the Pentagon. We get flashbacks of the terrorists reciting morning prayer or calling loved ones. This is an "artistic liberty" taken by the director because they could just as well have been having an early coffee at Starbucks or chanting "death to the infidel." One terrorist allegedly says "I love you" at the end of a cell-phone call before heading off to the airport.

We simply don't know exactly what they did or what their mind-set really was. What else don't we know? We don't know if the terrorists on that flight overpowered the pilots with box cutters they carried on board, or with small knives (as Greengrass portrays), or with kitchen knives they grabbed from their first-class breakfast trays. One of the terrorists was portrayed as wired with a bomb. Was it real or a fake? Passengers wouldn't know. Under the best of circumstances, the testimony of witnesses in court is often challenged as being very fuzzy and unreliable. Should we expect more accuracy from any of them during this hysterical and frenzied ordeal?

We should also remember that before 9/11 passengers were allowed to carry all manner of small knives and tools on their persons or in briefcases. How realistic is it that not one passenger on board that flight was carrying a small pocketknife? Greengrass doesn't identify any passenger as having one (based on the outside phone calls). But how many millions of small knives have been confiscated from passengers since 9/11, who should have

known such knives were now illegal as carry-on articles? What are the odds the Flight 93 passengers defied all the subsequent statistics about carry-on knives?

What the film does accurately portray is the surprise nature of the attacks. Air traffic controllers couldn't even confirm which flights had crashed into the World Trade Center until well after the attacks. In spite of zillions of dollars spent on military preparedness, electronic systems and the training of soldiers and civilians for just such "what-if" scenarios, the FAA and the military had no concrete plans they could execute.

Two NORAD planes that were finally scrambled could not get FAA clearance to fly over and protect Manhattan. If they had faced another errant commercial jet, one of them would have had to commit a suicide attack since reportedly neither plane was armed. There was also no person in the military or civilian leadership willing or able to define the rules of engagement that morning.

Where did that leave passengers on Flight 93? On their own. Once they realized they could be part of a larger hijack plan, they guessed that time was running out. If they waited, they would die. If they resisted the terrorists, they could die. But if they fought back, there was a faint glimmer of hope. They chose the faint glimmer of heroic hope.

Unfortunately, the legacy of those heroic passengers was to make such heroism more unlikely in the future. After 9/11, even though fuel-filled jets were used as guided missiles, we didn't try to shut down the airline industry; that would have crippled the economy. We didn't try to shut down the box cutter industry; if box cutters were indeed the weapons of choice of the terrorists, it would have been pretty tough to demonize the tool carried by virtually every Wal-Mart employee in the world. We didn't demand clear emergency response plans that would work; the spotlight would have shown too many flaws in what we had.

Because the sporting knife industry was relatively small, it became the scapegoats for that infamous day. Small knives were the real culprits, lawmakers and regulators told the nation. So they were banned from airplanes.

If terrorists beat the "system" in the future, they will do so in creative ways. They will not care whether knives or any other potential weapons are illegal. And now that grandma's 12-inch knitting needles are legal as carry-on, they might use them. Quite frankly, many tools, household utensils and sports gear can be weapons when wielded by trained criminals.

I would argue that if the legacy of the Flight 93 passengers is important, that we re-

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store the ability of law-abiding passengers to defend themselves and their fellow passengers. Airlines have now beefed up cockpit doors. The Transportation Safety Administration has refocused on bomb detection. However, we don't have air marshals on flights. After repeated security breaches, we replaced civilian airport screeners with direct TSA employees but USA Today announced in an article on April 28, 2006 that annual turnover has risen to nearly 25 percent at the agency. Even on the morning of 9/11, there were more than 4,000 commercial flights in the air when the twin towers were struck. Potential scenarios for a repeat are still astronomical.

I did not think the movie adequately conveyed the real horror of Flight 93. But I invite you to watch the movie with this question in mind. How can we give our law-abiding citizens a chance to defend themselves if we cannot absolutely guarantee we will defend them from all possible future scenarios?

David D. Kowalski is the Communications Coordinator for AKTI. His views are his own and do not represent the official view of AKTI or its individual or corporate members.

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