

Kathy Smith's Statement for Judiciary Hearing on Attacks Against Law Enforcement - 2022

To the members of the Committee on the Judiciary,

My name is Kathy Smith, wife of the late Sgt. Jim Smith with the Iowa State Patrol. I write this letter urging you to take steps to protect our law enforcement against attacks on their lives. These men and women in blue made a promise to serve and protect the people in our communities while facing the risk of paying the ultimate sacrifice. They do so willingly and with great courage each and every day. My husband had a love for justice and was one of the many who swore to protect others. He, along with many others, ended up giving his life for the sake of Justice. It is in honor of him and the fallen heroes that I plead with you to do something to help prevent future losses of our law enforcement officers.

Jim wanted to be in law enforcement since he was a toddler, and he carried out his life preparing for the day he would be sworn in as an Iowa State Trooper: December 10, 1993; it was his 24th birthday gift from God. Jim spent his life thanking God for that gift and making sure that he had chances to help people along the way, and maybe even save lives. Jim would explain to those being arrested that they could turn to faith, family, and friends instead of substances. Sometimes it was a wakeup call for them, and they would make better choices the next time, and other times people chose to return to those poor choices over and over again. No matter the outcome, the goal was the same: to point people to a better life.

Over the last 6-8 years, Jim shared with us that officers seemed to be treated differently than when he first started. There are always those people who are difficult, but it seemed to be growing with each year. The disrespect and "don't you have anything better to do" way of thinking became more prominent. The riots came and people were more demanding and violent towards police officers. They felt they had the freedom to express violence towards officers and get away with it. For the most part, they were not wrong. With the mobs of people, tension, vandalism, and media presence, officers accepted the assaults because they had no choice. My husband stood with his tactical team protecting the state capital in Iowa and had frozen water bottles and rocks thrown at them. Protesters spit and insulted them for hours at a time. I think back at how heartbreaking this time was for Jim, his team, and our family. We didn't want him to have to be a recipient of this type of abuse. Yet, he did it because that is what he signed on to do. It was a difficult time, but he and his team went wherever and whenever they were needed.

Our family realized how discouraged officers were becoming, because Jim started expressing to us how disheartened he was. He loved his job, and it was hard to witness the backlash from those who did not share his appreciation - especially when it came from those he was trying to protect. This disrespect takes a toll on all officers' joy, but, nevertheless, they bravely put on their uniforms each day and defend their communities. Just as my husband did.

Many of you never got the opportunity to meet Jim, but I wish you did. He would have made you laugh until your sides hurt and leave you with a smile. That chance was taken from you because his life was tragically ended on April 9, 2021, in Grundy Center, Iowa. Our family was torn apart because of one man's selfish, evil actions. His killer's face, and name, is forever etched in our minds.

Let me share with you what happened that horrific night and also allow me to introduce you to the man you should have had the opportunity to meet - Sgt. Jim Smith... a Godly man, an incredible husband, an amazing father, a dedicated officer, and a friend and hero to all those he met.

April 9th began as a “normal” day. Jim and I woke up early to exercise before we went our separate ways for the day – Jim was planning a statewide training day in Tama for all tactical team members in Iowa, so he had planned to work an extended shift. He was excited to help organize this yearly training. As I was getting ready to leave for work, I noticed Jim was receiving many texts on his phone. He admitted the texts were questions regarding the training and he apologized for being preoccupied. I gave him a smile to show him I understood and then a kiss on his forehead and raced out the door. Our family has a tradition of waving goodbye in our front window when anyone of us leaves the house.... It is just something we have always done. Well, Jim never made it to the window that morning. I figured I would see him later that night to give him a hard time. I never got that chance. I never would have imagined that would be the last time I would see him alive. He always came home to us after his shift. Always. Why would this day be any different?

I sent him occasional texts throughout the day...to remind him to check on his mother’s surgical procedure and to let him know that his daughter received a scholarship for college. He texted our “Family Posse”, which is what our family group name was called as we loved to watch old westerns. Jim stopped at the cemetery where his father was buried and sent us a picture of a horse he placed at his gravesite. His father’s birthday was April 9th. He suggested that we all watch an Audie Murphy or Roy Rogers movie when we all got back together again to honor his dad. He thanked us for being such a wonderful family and he told us he loved us. That was the very last text we received from him.

Zander, Jazlyn and I did not know anything about what was taking place that evening. We went about our usual schedule. Zander was at school in Creve Coeur, Missouri. Jazlyn finished her homework and was getting ready for bed. I was at the computer preparing our taxes. Then came a banging on our door. The words I hear over & over again, “Jim’s been shot, we need to get you to the hospital...” At first, I couldn’t comprehend what was going on but reminded myself of Jim’s seemingly mutant healing powers and that he would be okay. I kept telling myself that if he was shot in his arm or leg, he could just have surgery to remove the bullet, stitch him up, and he’d be fine. He’s had surgeries before, and he’d be back to work in no time doing what he loved to do.

As we entered Grundy Center, we saw emergency lights everywhere. Officers were attempting to apprehend the suspect and many of the roads were blocked off to keep the rest of the city safe. I’m still thinking at this moment that Jim will have another incredible story to tell us when we get there. He’ll be fine. We pulled up to the hospital, Jazlyn and I get out and are escorted to the front sliding glass door at the hospital. The doctor came over to me and said, “I’m sorry. We did all we could.” A sudden wave of numbness and terror rushed in. “What do you mean you’re sorry? Why are you not in performing surgery?” This was a nightmare... but I couldn’t wake up. I couldn’t feel my body and I felt physically ill. What was happening? I was shutting down. I’ve never experienced grief so deeply before. Jim was supposed to be here for me and our kids. Our future dreams and plans together would never be. So many questions.... Why?

I did not blame God for what happened... Evil people do evil things. I blame Michael Lang, the man who pulled the trigger, for making Jim suffer and destroying our family. My husband lived a life to serve others so when he heard the call for help, he made sure he was there. When Jim arrived on scene, he gathered information and led a team to apprehend the barricaded subject just like he had done hundreds of times. He gave Lang many opportunities to give up and turn himself in, but he refused. Lang did not give Jim the same treatment. Instead, Lang brutally shot my husband and laughed about it while threatening other officers that were stuck in the basement of his residence. What kind of sick person laughs about taking a life?

Fast forward one year. The trial. It began on May 9, 2022. Our life felt like it was on hold that entire year. There was no closure. Not knowing what was going to be decided about the man who took Jim away from us. There was so much I did not know and frankly did not want to know about that night. I avoided thinking about it. I did not want to be in the same room with the man who murdered Jim. But it was during the trial our family watched and learned more about the series of events that led up to Jim's death. We witnessed Lang's responses to those who testified. There was not a glimpse of emotion or remorse. He was not sorry for what he had done... what he had taken from Jim and our family. I felt anger I never experienced before and terror for those officers who were on the scene that night. One of officers who had been trapped in the basement for hours after Jim was shot said Lang stated that he was nice to the first guy by shooting him in the chest but come sunup he was going to shoot them in the face with a deer slug. Lang bragged, "I took it easy on your buddy. I put a slug through his chest," and then chuckled. Nice? He took it easy on him? I couldn't believe what I was hearing and that an individual could cause such chaos and destruction.

After a long and emotionally draining week, we are grateful that the jury convicted Lang of first-degree murder after only a couple of hours of deliberation. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. He was also given 5 years for assaulting another officer by luring him to a gravel road and attacking him, and 25 years for attempted murder of a peace officer by shooting the driver's side windshield of a Bearcat armored vehicle with the time to be served consecutively. Jim was granted some sense of justice with the outcome of the trial. But our family, and my heart, is forever broken. I feel robbed. We were supposed to grow old together. That was our plan. We wanted to be involved in the lives of our adult children and their children someday. I am now forced to live out the rest of my days without him and I truly feel lost.

Jim was my soul mate. Last August, we would've celebrated 28 years of marriage and 30 years together. I miss his smile, his laugh, his guidance and wisdom, his kind words, and his arms around me. He comforted me when I was sad, loved me unconditionally, listened to me when I needed to talk, made me laugh with his incredible sense of humor, taught our children to follow Christ, and he was the spiritual leader in our family. Jim loved us and always made time to spend with us. He didn't wait to live. He grabbed onto the moments knowing each day was a gift. Looking back, I am thankful because I will treasure those memories we made together, and I will hold onto them for as long as I live.

Who was Jim Smith? Jim was a man who dedicated his life serving God and protecting people. He put God first, his family second, and his job third. He started and ended each day on his knees in prayer. He loved being an Iowa State Trooper and part of the tactical team because he desired to make a difference. He was a humble man who read his Bible daily to grow closer with God. He made Jesus his Lord and Savior and wanted to please God in every aspect of his life. Jim spoke God's truth to everyone he came in contact with. He was a man of integrity who treated people fairly and with respect. That is how God instructed him to live. Loving God with his heart, soul, and mind was Jim's purpose and it showed like a bright light. God says, "Let your light shine before others" in Matthew 5:16. Jim lived this out. I loved him for the man he was and the man he strived to be daily. I have never met, nor will ever meet, another man like Jim.

Jim would remind us that God is with us no matter the circumstance, "God will allow us to go through the "valley" of life. We will have bad times. But God never abandons us. He is always there, walking with us, and leading us to better days ahead." Jim chose to share his faith with others planting seeds wherever he went. He lived to please God and the world is a better place because of him. I am a better person because of him.

So, the man you never got a chance to meet was many things... He was a faithful servant, an upholder of justice, a loving husband and father, a comedian, a humble man of God, and a superhero. To this day, no one ever saw Batman and Jim in the same room. Jim will forever be remembered as our hero. He is missed by his family, friends, and co-workers. You, along with many others, will only get a chance to hear how Sgt. Jim Smith lived his life and that he risked his everything to protect those around him. But it didn't have to be this way. Jim should still be here today. This act of violence was senseless and unprovoked. So, ultimately, it leaves you with a choice. You can allow culture's diminishing respect and police's lack of protection to continue down this dark path, permitting more families to face the same shattered fate as ours... or you can do something about it. You can listen to the problems we have, develop a plan to fix them, and save the lives of our officers. In doing so, you will strengthen our communities and allow them to feel better protected.

What problems do we face today? I believe there are many problems Law Enforcement faces today:

- 1) Safety. We need to keep our officers safe and protected when they are out protecting us. This means bullet proof vests and other protective gear but also up-to-date training so they will be better equipped to handle situations. This training will not just be for apprehension but also for de-escalation which will help to avoid dangerous circumstances and attempt to find peaceful surrender whenever possible.
- 2) Lack of respect. Officers are not always shown the respect they deserve for the incredible risks they endure. They willingly choose to put themselves in harm's way. Not everyone is made to do this. It takes courageous men and women to step up to the challenge. People need to show appreciation for them.
- 3) Criticism and Negativity. Officers are forced to make quick decisions daily. It is part of their job. They are criticized by people who second guess their every move. I believe the negativity growing toward law enforcement is growing and needs to stop. Of course, this is not saying that officers shouldn't be held accountable, merely that those who uphold the law and walk the straight and narrow should be positively encouraged.
- 4) Police Recruitment. There are less people seeking a career in law enforcement compared to past years. I believe this has to do with the way the public treats them.
- 5) Police Retention. Not as many officers want to stay in their jobs, because they do not feel that there is enough reward for the risks involved. Officers should be well compensated, and well supported, so they may provide for their families.
- 6) Mental and Physical Health. We need to supply officers with the means to help them physically and mentally on the job. They should desire to be physically fit to be able to handle certain situations but also be equipped with the tools necessary to deal with increased reports of PTSD, depression, and anxiety issues that stem from the harsh environment of their job and their treatment by the public.

So, what do we do? There is no easy solution. However, the change has to start somewhere. We need to work together to defend our police, not defund it. Cities in this country are falling apart because there are less officers in them. Understandably so. I would not subject myself to the ridicule and dangers associated with their careers, but many choose to be a light and are called to serve, just like my husband. Even our son desires to go into law enforcement because of the impact he witnessed his father make in the lives of others. We need to encourage those that are interested, not discourage them. It starts with our attitudes and actions. Our attitudes need to change right now. Our actions should be to serve and protect them as they choose to serve and protect us.

I urge you to do anything in your power to make the necessary changes to help our officers before we lose more of them to senseless crimes that could have been prevented. Protect them because they deserve to be protected. Care for their mental and physical needs and equip them with the necessary resources as they encounter daily difficulties in their job. Show the nation that the police are not meant to be fought against, but rather, they are worth fighting for. Tell the public of the sacrifice of Jim and other fallen officers. We need to work together to find a solution, not argue and waste precious time. If we pursue the path we are currently on, our country will continue to crumble and there will be no turning back. But if we choose to find a solution, we will take steps to overcome these issues and get back to a thriving society that shows respect and honor to those who serve once again. The change starts with you.

Thank you for your time.

Kathy Smith
Independence, Iowa