

He Gave It His All

When the wife of a prisoner at Brushy Mountain Correctional Complex in Petros, Tennessee, gunned down an officer escorting him from a hearing at the Roane County Courthouse, she killed a much-beloved citizen and a volunteer at Life Care Center of Morgan County.

Wayne Thomas "Cotton" Morgan, 56, a correctional officer at the prison for 28 years, was shot at least once about 10:15 a.m. Tuesday as he and partner Larry Harris, 53, escorted George Hyatte from a court appearance in Kingston. Authorities said Hyatte's wife, Jennifer, fired her pistol at the officers, and Morgan went down before he could draw his revolver. The Hyattes escaped, but were captured in Columbus, Ohio, late Wednesday evening.

Morgan was more than a lawman. He was a dedicated Christian who served his church, Meadowview Baptist, as a deacon, Sunday School teacher of a men's class, treasurer, and a song leader who sang duets with his wife, Viann. A Vietnam War veteran, Morgan was awarded a Purple Heart for wounds received in combat.

But beyond all of his other responsibilities, Morgan had a strong love for the residents of Life Care Center of Morgan County, said Daniel Rowe, the executive director, and Glenda Galloway, the activities director who headed up the programs in which he was involved.

"He had been coming here for about six years, at least once a month, spending about 2½ hours," Galloway said. "He brought members of his church here, and organized the worship service for our residents. For those who were unable to attend the service, 'Cotton' would personally do in-room visits and read the Bible to residents."

Residents and staff, who also know friends and family members of Morgan, are devastated at the news of his death, Rowe said. "It hit so close to home."

Wilma Moss, the assistant activities director, is married to Ricky Moss, who has worked as a correctional officer at Brushy Mountain for 23 years, alongside Morgan. She described Morgan as having "a nice manner, very polite and courteous."

She recalls a particular event when his compassion was very meaningful to her family. "In 1994, when we lost our son, Dustin Tyler (who was stillborn), he came to our house several times to counsel and comfort my husband. He was always asking, 'Is there anything I can do for you?'"

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At work, he would give out Bibles to prisoners, Moss said, and he led a jail ministry at the Wartburg jail each Thursday evening.

The Rev. Luke Ward, immediate past pastor of Meadowview Baptist, said Morgan's life could be summed up in these words: "Everything he went at, he put his whole heart into it. It was true of his family, it was true of his work, and it was certainly true of his church. It was unreal the gifts that he had. When he sang, it was just exceptional. He was a skilled tracker in the mountains. He was a blessing and a help at the nursing home. Anything that needed to be done at the church, he was there to help and work. Exalting Christ was the passion of his life."

The shooting has had such a profound effect, the Rev. Ward said. "Everybody is so hurt; the whole community is devastated."

In addition to his wife, survivors include two children: Dennis Wayne Morgan and Carla Keeton, and two grandchildren. The funeral service will be held today (Friday) at 2 p.m. at Central Middle School, with burial to follow in Liberty Cemetery.

The lives of the three principals in the drama that unfolded Tuesday hung in the balance as the gunfire sounded. Two of them chose the road that leads to destruction. Wayne Morgan was in the narrow way that took him to salvation and glory.

The loss to the community he loved and the state he served is enormous. But the tracks he made will endure because of the impressions he left in the hearts and souls of those who knew him. Those steps all led to Christ, who has welcomed him into His kingdom, with words of "Well done, good and faithful servant." It is a greeting that we all should aspire to receive.

--Beecher Hunter