

Friends support suspect in shooting at VA hospital

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'Big Mike' Gardner described as teddy bear

MURFREESBORO — You wouldn't expect that a man charged with coming to work and firing a shotgun at fellow employees would keep a lot of friends.

Yet since Michael Gardner's arrest a few weeks ago, those who know him have been rallying to his aid.

Supporters from throughout the community have contributed to a fund for his legal defense organized by friends.

Those friends have been unanimous and passionate about saying that the Michael Gardner they knew wouldn't hurt a fly.

Kathy Green has been taking care of Gardner's dog, Lacy, while he is in the Rutherford County Jail on charges of attempted murder, aggravated burglary, especially aggravated kidnapping, reckless endangerment and possession of a weapon while committing a felony.

Lacy, a 3-year-old Rottweiler, is a teddy bear, just like "Big Mike," Green said.

Gardner, 50, is accused of firing a shotgun at employees inside the Alvin C. York Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Murfreesboro, where he worked for 18 years. He is also accused of exchanging fire with VA police during the Oct. 7 incident in which no one was injured.

"In 30 years of practice, I have rarely seen as much community support for someone charged with crimes this serious," said David Raybin, his attorney.

"I've interviewed well over 40 people, and they all tell me this man was a wonderful employee, well respected, well regarded and that this was totally out of character."

Lacy accompanied Gardner to the VA that day, according to a message about the crisis sent out to employees by Director David Pennington. There, Gardner fired into a desk under which a human resources employee was hiding and into the door of an employee who was not at work, Pennington wrote.

Upon leaving the building, Gardner fired two shots at a VA police car, Pennington wrote, and the shots hit the car's windshield and emergency lights. One officer got out of the car and returned fire. VA spokeswoman Molly Reynolds said Pennington's internal memo was correct to the best of the VA's knowledge.

Longtime friend Donna Primm said she'd still trust the 300-pound Gardner with her young children.

In the weeks before the incident, Gardner was under administrative investigation, the nature of which Reynolds did not disclose.

"I saw him go through just — hurt — for the things he had been accused of," said Primm, who has known Gardner for more than 20 years and considers him a family member. "He said, 'It just hurts my heart to be accused of something I didn't do.' "

She said that since the incident, people had called asking about him who hadn't seen him in years.

"I don't think he realized how many people he touched," she said.

Green, who has known Gardner for more than five years, said there was nothing in Gardner's character that would have led her to believe he was capable of the acts of which he stands accused.

"Everybody's got their breaking point," she said. "But I would have thought even I'd have been a more likely candidate for something like that than him."

Gardner remains jailed in Rutherford County in lieu of \$1 million bail.

Gardner will undergo a mental evaluation in the next few weeks, Raybin said. Prosecutors are also entitled to have an examination conducted.

"He obviously had some kind of mental break," Raybin said.

Doctors will have to determine whether the treatment and medication Gardner was receiving for various mental and physical problems contributed to his actions that day, Raybin said.

Friend Steve Staples, who co-owns the Murfreesboro Outdoors store, said in the seven years he has known Gardner, he'd never seen him have a bad day.

"He never said a bad word about anybody," Staples said.

"We're shocked. It's like your minister being accused of something."

Gardner used to bring Lacy into the store on occasion, he said.

"Anybody could walk up and pet her. Anybody who's not good would not have a dog like that."

His friends described Gardner as an avid rabbit and deer hunter and crappie fisherman — the kind of person you'd give the keys to your house to without thinking twice.

The VA center is a federal building, and the FBI and VA inspector general's office are assisting with the investigation.

Raybin said Gardner could also face federal charges, although none had yet been filed. State and federal prosecutors are discussing who would take jurisdiction in the case, Raybin said.

The VA's inspector general's office did not return a call for comment.