

On the Frontlines of J Frank White Academy

By Sarah Proctor

KNOXVILLE, Tenn., Oct. 13, 2024 --- It is 9:43 a.m. on Sept. 13, 2024 and J. Frank White Academy (JFWA) is in complete darkness and silence until the banging starts.

“We’re good,” said Dr. Hudson, the school’s principal, as she knocked on door 213 of Kayla Hammer’s classroom.

Hammer, a second-grade teacher, sighs in relief.

JFWA has just successfully completed its second intruder drill of the school year.

As Hammer starts to move the desks, she puts her hand on her stomach. She is due in February with a baby girl and these drills make her nervous for a multitude of reasons.

“I think about it [a shooting occurring at her school] often,” Hammer said. “I have babies to come home to and I don’t know if I can put their [her students’] lives before hers [the child she is pregnant with].”

Hammer didn’t sign up for this part of the job, nor did her coworkers at JFWA.

JFWA is a small K-12 school located in Harrogate, Tennessee, with a student body of 112. In the five weeks that school has been in session, students have made two active shooting threats.

JFWA was not the only school impacted. In Tennessee, Homeland Security investigated 125 threats alone in the second week of September.

Luckily, these threats were determined to not be credible. But, they still caused unnecessary stress and harm to faculty and parents.

After these series of threats, the husband of one of the teachers “donated” military trauma kits to every classroom. In the kit, there are a myriad of products including bandages, gauze and gloves.



Figure 1 Photo of the military emergency kit in Hammer's classroom that she keeps in the case of an active shooter. (UTK/Sarah Proctor)

“My husband took some of these from the [military] base for us,” said D’Andrea, a fifth-grade teacher. “He thought we would need these just in case.”

Hammer keeps her military kit near the front door of her classroom. The kit serves as an unwelcome reminder of what could happen and whether she would be prepared for it. In addition to the kits, she has taken several steps to protect herself is necessary.

“I took FAST [First Aid for Severe Trauma] classes in the Summer at the Red Cross,” Hammer said.

In addition, the teachers at JFWA all get access to free therapy from Lincoln Memorial University, a private university that JWFA shares a campus with. Graduate students head the program to get their required clinical hours.

The school has also upped its security measures. According to its [website](#), JFWA has its own police force, and the campus buildings are locked with key card access only. Students are escorted during drop-off and pick-up times by campus police.

“Safety by chance, not by choice” is JFWA’s motto, after all.

These protocols were implemented earlier this year after Governor Bill Lee signed into law a [bill](#) permitting teachers to carry firearms on school campuses.

“I was shocked,” Hammer said. “Guns shouldn’t be allowed anywhere with children.”



Figure 2 Hammer's yearbook photo for the 2024-2025 school year. (JFWA/Emily Cave).

Hammer has personally seen the pitfalls of guns on campus. She survived a school shooting when she was in high school. Hammer was a freshman at Central High School on Aug. 21, 2008, when 15-year-old gunman Jamar Siler shot Ryan McDonald in the school cafeteria.

“That was the worst day,” she said. “I get sick thinking about it still and how life just went on after that somehow.”

Hammer reflects on that day often, but she pushes forward in her career today, refusing to be nihilistic.

“I was called to education I know that much,” Hammer said.

Hammer appears to be correct in her teaching aspirations. She won Claiborne County's Teacher of the Year for the 2023-2024 school year. A career first for her in her eight years of teaching.

"I was surprised, to be honest, but for me, that just affirmed I was in the right place," she said.

Hammer uses these small victories as signs to continue teaching. These awards act as a weak reconciliation of sorts...until the next tragedy happens, and Hammer is forced to deal with the trauma.

Quite strange how life goes on in the frontlines, indeed.

