

From Antoinette Tuff to Captain Sully, heroes are made, not born

By Elizabeth Svoboda August 30, 2013

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They flash into public view like signal flares, dazzling us with their courageous and selfless acts. [Wesley Autrey](#), who jumped onto New York City subway tracks to save a man from an oncoming train. [Captain Chesley Sullenberger](#) of US Airways, who landed his plane and passengers safely on New York's Hudson River after birds knocked out both engines. [Charles Ramsey](#), who helped free Amanda Berry from her kidnapper's Cleveland home. And most recently, [Antoinette Tuff](#), who talked would-be Georgia school shooter Michael Brandon Hill into putting down his rifle so students could get out alive.

Actions like these might seem to be split-second snap judgments, but often they are a natural result of lives that have primed people for selflessness. Put another way: Heroes aren't born, they're made.

Expertise and training in helping others often spur people to act — rather than run or freeze — in a crisis. Even if someone hasn't faced a particular emergency before, extensive and even general preparation helps the brain act almost automatically.

Someone who keeps current with her CPR certification, for example, is more likely than your average bystander to be able to help a person who's not breathing. A pilot for more than 40 years, Sullenberger had flown many types of aircraft, including engineless gliders — experience that came in handy when he had to land a plane with two failed engines. When Hill barged into McNair Discovery Learning Academy on Aug. 20, toting an AK-47, Tuff relied on her special emergency-response training as she tried to keep the situation under control.

Like those who have been trained to save lives or manage crises, individuals who are part of organizations promoting selflessness often have the making of heroes. Sullenberger was steeped in an aviation culture that stresses putting others first when danger threatens. And Autrey was a veteran of the Navy, which has a "core values charter" that emphasizes doing the right thing, even if you face personal consequences. In a [2006 survey](#) of organizations with written codes of ethics, about two in three employees reported that the code affected their decision-making, and more than four in five said they applied their knowledge