By Stephanie R. Holan, Esq., M.Ed.

SXSW is a week-long conference and festival held in Austin each year, that celebrates the convergence of film, music, tech, education, and culture. Because Hollywood A-listers tend to be the focus of the news during SXSW I was surprised, and excited, to be invited to a technology school-safety exhibition.

When I arrived at J.J. Pearce Elementary, and was directed to come inside, I expected to find equipment for upgrades to security I was familiar with. When I entered the cafeteria, I was a bit underwhelmed. There were two small tables that had drones and laptops on it, what appeared to be paintballs, and three relatively small screens. My first thought was that I was going to be disappointed.

I was introduced to a small group of people, Justin Marston, CEO & Founder of Campus Guardian Angel, Bill King, former Navy Seal Team Chief Tactical Officer & Cofounder, Taylor Worthington, Head of Operations, Ben Hogan, GM of Education, and Christian "Amari" Van Sloun, Chief Pilot. These were not the job titles I had expected.

Justin explained that he and Bill, who was in "an organization we aren't supposed to reference", came together to create Campus Guardian Angel—a defense-drone program for school campuses. In the past, Justin developed many of the security programs and protocol for the Department of Defense and the National Security Agency, that are currently in use, and Bill trained SEAL teams on strategic missions for asset recovery for over 30 years.

The drones are weaponized, outfitted with high-resolution cameras, and are designed to 'live' on each school's campus. When the school realizes there is an active-shooter or bomb threat, the drones are activated. The drones' weapons are non-lethal, but HIGHLY effective. I was treated to drone demos AND I got to utilize a drone and weapon in an active-shooter simulation.

The drones are outfitted with front-lances to break and fly through windows, support sirens, air pepper poppers (pepper-powder pellets), sound blasts that are debilitating, and can make tactical kinetic-energy hits. The demonstrations were incredible.

The pepper-poppers fly at 550 feet per second. Upon impact, they create powdered-pepper puffs that float on the air (similar to what happens when you open a bag of flour), thus neutralizing the threat because of the reaction of the eyes, nose, and lungs.

The lances can fly hard and fast through glass windows allowing them to access buildings in places where no human could. The drone is then used to neutralize the threat in the room/building.

The drones fire sound blasts that are painfully loud. During the demonstration, Justin said, 'that was louder than last time' at the same time I commented, 'well, that was…INTENSE'. They also create a flash-bang, like very bright flash bulbs, using photosensitivity to blind the threat.

The last drone weapon is a kinetic-energy hit. The drone acts like a battering ram and is flown directly into the threat's face at 60-70 m.p.h. As it was eloquently put, 'that would cause some damage'. Imagining the kinetic-energy strike was nothing compared to witnessing the real thing. The football-dummy used in the simulation runs about 122 lbs. When the drone struck the dummy, all the flashes and sound weapons go off, but the dummy was also completely knocked backwards onto the floor. There was nothing delicate about it. No active shooter would be able to remain standing.

Prior to being installed in the schools, the school is mapped and photographed by the drones, rendering a replica of the school so the drone pilots can direct the drone to the threat. The drones' cameras are also monitored by trained security agents and world-class drone pilots. The pilots must train for a minimum of 6 months, prior to being able to be in the field.
The drones are also able to fly on every level of the school and make turns at dizzying speeds. The drones speed, flight, and agility make them more effective than a physical security officer. Drones incapacitate the shooter so the police can apprehend them.

These features reduce the likelihood of a shooter being able to carry out an attack. It also eliminates exposing officers to bullet-discharges. The drones have two-way communication so they can communicate with police and direct them to the threat. They also can communicate with the teachers, staff, and students.

I immediately asked the price of a Campus Guardian Angel. One set of angels runs about $15,000 and includes six drones: 4 for the inside and 2 for the outside of the building.

The 6 drones are then paired with 8 remote operators that pilot the drones. Each drone's battery lasts about 8 minutes, which is longer than the time of most active-shooting incidents.

The drones are not hackable. They are built with unique encrypted software and materials, chips, and power that are completely unique to Campus Guardian Angel. They use no parts or materials from other countries. They are 100% built, programmed, and encoded with CGA encrypted tech; no one else has it. Additionally, the drones do not connect via IP, meaning they are not on-line, so they cannot be infected with a virus, or neutralized by hackers.

For the simulation, we walked to the gym. I was handed a mock-automatic weapon that held powder balls. Then one of the drone pilots asked me if I was ready. The pilot put the drone into action. This scenario demonstrated the maneuverability and effectiveness of delaying an active shooter. When confronted with a drone that is attempting to neutralize them, the shooter would likely start shooting at the drone to take it out. My attempt at hitting the drone was unsuccessful. Very unsuccessful. It was too fast and agile for me to hit a moving target. Two others participated in the same simulation and while they each had one pellet hit the drone, it did NOTHING to stop the drone. In the off chance an active shooter hit one drone, there are 5 other that are deployed with the same capabilities.

In addition to the exhibition and demonstration I watched and participated in, four Texas high school students from around the state were on hand for a discussion about what it is like being a student in this generation, exposed to more shooting events than every before. Teagn M., a senior at Boerne High School, neighbor to Uvalde, discussed what it was like to walk back into school after knowing that a school with her friends in attendance, was like. "Playing them the following year in football, and getting to talk with a sister of a girl that passed away You have to treat it like it's real, at this point…seeing Uvalde in my high school years, I can tell you that they were frivolous, and we would talk, after Uvalde it is complete and utter silence. It's a lot more nerves, and even though we know it's practice, you can feel the tension. It's gotten so real in our minds and we're thinking about it constantly."

I asked the four when they first started practicing active-shooter drills and without hesitancy in unison they all said, "Elementary School". My heart hurt in that moment. They were never allowed to be innocent.

With resignation in his voice, Conner P, a sophomore at LASA in Austin replied, "In first grade you don't know much, the teacher tells you to go to the corner of the room, and turns the lights off, and to be quiet for a few minutes. It wasn't until middle school where it was like, 'Oh. This is why we are doing this'. When I was in third grade, it was the first big school shooting, but I can't remember where it was. There's been too many. Now that I am a sophomore, I've become desensitized to it."

"I have an open campus, and we don't even have officers in our school", said Ella G., a Junior at St. John Paul, II High School in Corpus Christi. "Knowing the drone has a scan of the school and can travel faster than any person would help because we wouldn't have to worry about not having any security."

Ella G. shared that the Lockdown Drills every other month aren't useful. "It doesn't really help when you do the drill. In an actual shooting I don't think everyone would really react the way they make us practice. They just come over the intercom and say, 'Lockdown. Lockdown.', and that's it. They don't explain what we should do at all. That's why the drones would help. We would know what is supposed to happen."

Teagn, whose school is so close to Uvalde, has dealt with the implementation of more security measures. "We are required to wear student ids. From the moment you get there, you're not allowed on the campus without the Vice Principal or Principal checking that you have your ID badge, and that you have YOUR correct ID badge. You can only compartmentalize that so much. I went home [the day of the shooting] and it was, of course, on tv. You would know, when situations of that capacity occur, you are glued to the tv. You can't believe in your heart and mind that something of that magnitude would happen. Going back to school after the Uvalde shooting, there weren't a lot of conversations about it, because we had all seen and heard the news. But it did make me think, "I gotta plan for this."

When asked if they thought technology like this would *actually* make schools safer, all four students agreed that they would, and these drones would be more effective than scanners or a school resource officer. Lareyna A., a sophomore at Jarrell High School, remarked, "When it's just one officer at the school, there's not a way for them to get to the right place in time, and the drones can do things humans can't. I think some sort of counseling or class on handling conflict would be beneficial, too. Some kids don't have proper home training, so they feel like if they're angry they can take it out on all of us. If they had a class to work through emotions and learn not resort to violence, it would help. The drones and the class would help us not worry as much."

Lareyna A. went on to say she believes that all students would benefit from watching demonstrations of the drones' capabilities would reduce the fear of the unknown and we would all know how they can protect us.

Connor P. believes that the drones' capabilities will reduce the anxiety that students experience seeing security everywhere in the school. "At a certain point…you've just got to stop thinking about the risk of a school shooting. There's a moment where you realize you don't need think about it. You have other things to

worry about…like a chemistry exam later in the day.

"When you see the security measures like an officer and bullet proof doors, every day, you cannot stop thinking about it. Having the drones in a box somewhere and keeping them out of sight would reduce the stress of being confronted with the possibility of a shooting every day."

"Whenever we hear a door slam, or some other unexpected sound, we immediately assume it is a gunshot. It sucks that that's the first thing our minds go to because we have all been conditioned that bad stuff happens in schools."

He went on to share that the drones have non-lethal weapons, which is better than a police presence because, "The people doing school shootings are kids. They're probably somebody in the same grade as me. I probably know them. And as hard as it is to fathom something as heinous as a school shooting, it still means the shooter is one of the students I know. And, also with the current security, you know your classmate is going to be killed. And be martyred for the destruction they have caused. It also inspires other people to do the same horrible things. That's scary."

In addition to the physical protection Campus Guardian Angel brings to schools, it is also working with the Texas Legislature on HB 462. HB 462 governs the safety allotment given to schools, the necessity for armed security officers to be present at public schools, and provides for the creation of a mental health allotment for creating the kind of program the students said would be beneficial—training students how to handle anger, rejection, fear, and disappointment, without resorting to violence.

Currently, the Texas Legislature provides $10 per student as a security allotment. As one of the legislators working with Campus Guardian Angel said. "We can't do anything with $10 a student. HB 462 would raise the per-student amount and provide that schools would need to be in compliance with the security requirements to receive it. This incentivizes schools to implement programs like Campus Guardian Angel.

As a still-licensed former teacher, a mother, and an attorney, I can truly say that I am familiar with all the roles you find when you discuss school violence. In 22 years of working in these fields, this is by far the most logical and effective security program I have seen that addresses school violence. For the critics out there, who believe that a drone program is 'too violent' and lets the students 'know too much', I agree that a situation like this is sad. Unfortunately, violence has existed for a very long time, and we must prepare for the worst-case scenarios. Not because we want that scenario, but because in that scenario, I want my child and schools to have an effective defense plan in place. This plan offers the fastest response, with the most effective neutralizing system I have seen, without the effect of human casualties. For me, I will take a Campus Guardian Angel any day of the week.

For more information on Campus Guardian Angel, visit https://www.campusguardianangel.com and to follow the progress of HB 462, visit https://legiscan.com/TX/text/HB462/2025.

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