

# Meet the reluctant hero who saved a deputy's life on Grand Island

By [Dan Herbeck](#) | News Staff Reporter | [Google+](#) on August 27, 2016 - 4:22 PM

One Grand Island resident thinks Peter O'Brien deserves to be named "citizen of the year."

Another wants the town to hold a reception where people can meet and honor him as a hero.

A local police officer wants to thank O'Brien by buying him a \$20 Tim Hortons gift card.

By now, many people know about the 65-year-old O'Brien, credited with saving a deputy's life, freeing him from a chokehold and attack by two people and a pit bull Wednesday night on Grand Island.

But O'Brien, a retired dock worker, wants nothing to do with the shower of praise.

"Nah, I'm no hero," O'Brien said during a reluctant interview with The Buffalo News. "Police officers are out there dealing with criminals every day. They're the heroes."

Yet police say O'Brien is a hero, and that he prevented Sammy O. Abdellatif from strangling Deputy Jason Clark on Wednesday night in a ditch near a golf course on Grand Island.

"It is our belief that (Abdellatif) was trying to kill Deputy Clark, just as he had threatened to do," said Scott Zylka, spokesman for the Erie County Sheriff's Office. "Based on the injuries to the deputy's neck, it looked like the suspect was trying to strangle him. Deputy Clark was gasping for air."

There is no doubt that O'Brien helped Clark to break away from the chokehold, Zylka said.

"I also don't think he realizes yet the enormity of what he did," Zylka said of O'Brien.

O'Brien told deputies he wanted no publicity about his role in the rescue, but The News tracked him down on Grand Island where he lives with a friend.

He was willing to talk to a reporter for just 10 minutes. And he would not allow the reporter to take a photograph of him.

O'Brien is a trim, muscular man of average height with straight, sandy hair and a moustache. He looks at least 10 years younger than 65. He wore a T-shirt and shorts as he stood in the front doorway of his friend's home, politely doing his best to dodge questions.

"I don't crave attention," he said. "I'm a relatively private guy."

But O'Brien did explain his motivation for stopping to help the deputy as he drove along East River Road near the River Oaks golf course at about 8:30 p.m. Wednesday.

He saw a commotion in the ditch and what appeared to be a police officer in trouble.

O'Brien said he has been deeply disturbed in recent months by violent attacks on police officers in several American cities.

“I think it’s disgusting, utterly disgusting, what has been going on,” he said.

Those strong feelings probably provided at least part of the motivation for his actions Wednesday night, he said.

### **‘I just thought I should stop’**

O’Brien was reluctant to discuss precisely what happened in that ditch.

“It’s all going to come out in court sometime down the line,” he said.

He did say that he saw a police car and realized that someone, possibly a policeman, was in a ditch and in some difficulty.

“I just thought I should stop,” he said.

The Sheriff’s Office said Abdellatif, 22, was choking Clark and that Brittany Ashley-Graser, 21, had jumped on the deputy’s back when O’Brien stopped.

O’Brien helped the gasping deputy break free, police said, and Clark was able to stagger away and catch his breath before Deputy Nicholas Coniglio arrived and pulled his service weapon on Abdellatif.

“He saved my life,” Clark told Coniglio, pointing at O’Brien.

O’Brien said he came away from the incident physically unscathed, though Abdellatif’s pit bulldog “nicked me on the ankle at one point.”

O’Brien has “no permanent address” but has been staying recently with friends on Grand Island, a police official told The News.

That is true, O’Brien said.

O’Brien said he grew up in Amherst and graduated from one of the Williamsville high schools. He said he spends part of every year camping out, and at other times, stays with friends on Grand Island and elsewhere in the Buffalo area.

Gary Doyle, a longtime friend, said he was not surprised that O’Brien jumped in to help.

“Peter is the kind of guy, you always know he has your back,” Doyle said. “He is that kind of guy. To me, he is a hero. I asked him, ‘What if that criminal had a loaded gun, and fired at you? Or, what if the deputy thought you were one of the bad guys, and he pulled out his gun and fired at you?’

“Peter said he just jumped into the middle of it because it was the right thing to do. He has great respect for police officers and the military.”

Doyle is not the only person who considers O’Brien a hero.

“Thanks to God and Mr. O’Brien, Deputy Clark is home and celebrating life with his wife and two young children,” said Sheriff Timothy B. Howard.

Several Grand Island residents also praised O’Brien.

“Oh, my gosh, what this man did is awesome,” said Nancy Bindhammer, who spoke to a reporter while helping out at her daughter’s yard sale on Baseline Road. “I’d like to nominate him for citizen of the year.”

“We’ve lived on the island for 56 years and never seen anything happen like this,” said John Corrao, 87, who lives with his wife, Maureen, near the scene of the incident.

“God bless this man, a private citizen, for helping out. I wish we could do something for this man. Maybe have some kind of ceremony where everyone could meet him and thank him. Maybe he could get some kind of stipend for what he did.”

A police officer who knows Clark said he was thankful the deputy survived the attack

“I don’t know this man, but I’m going to find out where he is and send him a \$20 Tim Hortons gift card,” the officer said.

When a reporter told O’Brien that some people on Grand Island think he should be honored, O’Brien frowned.

“No way,” he said. “It’s no big deal.”