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Orlando victims scare off armed robbers with own guns

They draw permitted concealed weapons when suspect shoots

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Two holders of concealed-weapons permits surprised armed thugs who approached them in west Orlando this week. Both men opened fire rather than surrender their wallets. The robbers beat it.

"They left with broken egos. They didn't get nothing from us," Juan Amezaga said Tuesday. "If more people stood up for themselves, a lot of crime could be prevented. And the concealed-weapons permit, that's great."

The men say they exercised their constitutional right to own guns, carried them legally and defended themselves within the state's deadly force law. **"If it's appropriate, people have to defend themselves," said Sgt. Barbara Jones, Orlando police spokeswoman.** "It's no different from us using a gun. It has to be justified, and we will, of course, investigate what happened."

The gunfight erupted at 6:10 p.m. Monday near Clear Lake, according to a police report on the incident. Amezaga, 25, and Stephen Soto, 23, were enjoying the fall weather outside Soto's apartment on South Wilts Circle when two strangers walked by them two or three times. Thinking that was suspicious behavior, Amezaga and Soto took notice when both strangers walked up to Amezaga's parked car, where the men were standing. "What time is it?" one of the strangers asked. Soto looked down at his watch and said, "It is 6:10." Raising his head, Soto heard the stranger say, "Hey, run them," as the man drew a black snub-nose revolver from the pouch in his sweat shirt.

As Soto pulled a 9 mm Keltec pistol from his right front pants pocket, he heard the robber's gunfire and felt a bullet graze his left shin, breaking the skin. Still standing, **Soto fired two or three times before both robbers turned and ran, the report states.** "They tried to rob me and my homeboy," Soto said in a telephone interview Tuesday. "Man, put it like this: If I didn't have a concealed-weapons permit, it would have been a lot worse."

When the robbers fled, one stopped, turned and fired an unknown number of shots. Soto shot back and fired two to three more times, and Amezaga drew his .357 Magnum Sig Sauer pistol and fired eight or nine times at the robbers. Crime-scene technicians later collected 15 shell casings ejected by both of the men's handguns, the report said. Both men were unsure whether they hit either robber. Police did not determine where the 15 bullets fired by the men struck in the neighborhood.

Police are looking for two young men who sped away after getting into a gray or silver Chrysler 300 or Dodge Intrepid sedan. It had stock rims and dark tinted windows, and one headlight was not working. The vehicle was last seen speeding north toward Mable Butler Boulevard. **Amezaga and Soto bought their pistols after becoming concerned about Orlando's increase in violent crime.**

Nearly 20,000 people in Orange County legally carry concealed firearms, records show. The number of licenses for concealed weapons in the county has jumped 20 percent in the past year and rose 57 percent in the past five years. The state Division of Licensing had sent out nearly a quarter-million applications for permits statewide by June, a 33 percent increase from five years ago.

Soto, who installs sound systems, arrived four years ago from New York and obtained his concealed-weapons permit last year. Amezaga, a warehouse worker who moved here eight years ago from Puerto Rico, also obtained a permit last year. Both practice at public gun ranges in Orlando and Apopka. "It could have been real bad last night if it wasn't for the quick thinking and our concealed-weapons permits," he said. "We might not even be here."

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