

Dallas-Fort Worth's 'modern survivalists' are ready for layoffs - or war

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Jack Spirko owns a media company, is married to a nurse and has a son in college. He has two dogs and lives in a nice house with a pool in a diversified neighborhood in Arlington.

Spirko, 36, considers himself an average guy with a normal life.

But for the past few years, Spirko has been stockpiling food, water, gas, guns and ammunition. He also has a load of red wine, Starbucks coffee and deodorant stashed away.

"I refer to myself as a modern survivalist, which means I don't do without," Spirko explained. "I have a nice TV; I have nice furniture. We are not living in the sticks, but I take all of these things very seriously."

Spirko, an Army veteran and self-described "stark-raving-mad Libertarian," is part of a growing movement of people who are preparing for a disaster — natural, economic or man-made. Referred to as "modern survivalists" or "preppers," they are taking steps to protect and provide for their families should something bad happen.

Theirs is a different breed of survivalist, far from the right-wing militants or religious extremists who hole up in bunkers, live off the land and wait for the apocalypse.

Preppers are regular people with regular jobs who decided after 9-11, after Hurricane Katrina or when their 401(k)s tanked that they can't rely on someone else to help them if something goes awry.

"We are normal people just like you," Spirko said. "We just understand that, sometimes, stuff goes wrong."

Prompted by Katrina

Donnie, 38, a McKinney resident who is an account executive with an international trade show organization, said Hurricane Katrina opened his eyes. He spent six weeks working as a paramedic in New Orleans.

"It was a logistical nightmare getting to the area," Donnie said. "And the longer you were there, the more you realized that, in a blink of an eye, your life can be turned upside down. I don't want to be the person in the bread line or standing in line for ice."

Donnie, like many of those interviewed for this article, agreed to talk to the *Star-Telegram* on the condition that his last name not be used.

"I usually don't advertise it," Donnie said. "There are people who cast a wary eye."

He said that after Katrina, he amassed about two weeks' worth of food. But last September, after the economy began to sour, he "kicked into a higher gear" and acquired more supplies and water-filtration systems.

"I probably have about six months' worth of food for two people," Donnie said. "I keep about 30 gallons of water on hand, and I have the means to store another 200 gallons if I have advance notice of something going bad."

Art Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, said that when people start stockpiling food and water or buying weapons, they are in a motivational state called "avoidance mode."

"You turn on the news and only hear about job losses and the prospect that things are going to get worse than better," he said. "You see signals that the world is full of nasty things you need to avoid. You've engaged in this general sense of avoidance. You are trying to focus on safety concerns."

Markman said the trend is not surprising, given the economy.

What exactly preppers are preparing for isn't specific. It could be a layoff, tornado, global pandemic or nuclear war.

Internet sites devoted to survivalism often refer to scenarios like TEOTWAWKI, an acronym for "the end of the world as we know it."

"I am prepared for just about any disaster that disrupts everyday living," said Bob, 43, a sales manager from eastern Pennsylvania who runs www.thinkprepared.net.

"... The economy is at the forefront of my concerns. The unemployment rate is soaring, and most people are not prepared to be without a paycheck for a week, much less a month or longer," Bob said.

Booming business

Businesses that sell storable foods, disaster shelters and guns are thriving.

Bruce Hopkins, owner of Best Prices Storable Foods, which sells dehydrated and canned foods, said sales "exploded" last spring and remain steady. On a single day last week, Hopkins sold \$31,000 worth of storable food. Hopkins said a popular item is a one-year food supply for a family of four or family of two, priced at \$4,000 and \$2,700, respectively.

"I think to have anything less than a month's food supply is foolish," said Hopkins, whose business is in Quinlan, south of Greenville. "I think it is time to stop watching *American Idol* and start paying attention to what is going on in the world."

Walton McCarthy, owner and principal engineer of Radius Engineering International, builds underground disaster shelters that protect against nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, among other things.

He said his business has tripled since July, when reports of Iranian missile tests surfaced. McCarthy's disaster shelters hold 10 to 300 people and cost \$105,000 to \$6 million. His customers include politicians, doctors and key executives.

"What we are going through now is the Pearl Harbor blues," said McCarthy, whose company is based in Forney, east of Dallas. "All of the ingredients are here. It is around the corner, and no one should be surprised."

At Cheaper Than Dirt Outdoor Adventures, a gun store in north Fort Worth, business has never been better. Owner Dewayne Irwin said he sees three types of customers: "You have the everyday good ol' boy Texas gun owner. You have the folks that are coming in and saying, 'I've lost my job and my neighbor lost their job' and they really believe they might have to fight over a bucket of carrots or something. And you have the guys who are first-time gun buyers and they don't really know why. It is Main Street. It is crazy."

'Going back to my roots'

Spirko grew up in rural Pennsylvania, where hunting, fishing, gardening, and canning and storing food were a way of life.

"No one looked at that back then and said, 'These people were survivalists,' " Spirko said. "That is just what you did."

After Spirko got out of the Army, he moved to Texas and started working in communications and sales.

"I found myself in my mid-20s pursuing corporate America, working the six-figure job and traveling all over the United States," Spirko said.

And then, Y2K happened or, rather, didn't happen.

"I thought they were absolutely crazy," Spirko said. "They thought the toaster was going to explode when it goes to 2000 or whatever."

And while Spirko didn't buy into the Y2K scare, he did think legitimate concerns had been raised.

"Right after that, we had the dot-com bubble explode. We had the stock market crash. My portfolio went down by 50 percent overnight. And then 9-11," he said. "I started going back to my roots and started to look at ways to preserve our cash and make sure we had some food on hand."

In July, Spirko launched a podcast for modern survivalists at TheSurvivalPodcast.com. He encourages people to pay down their debt and have extra cash, water and food and an evacuation plan. About the same time, he expanded his backyard garden, where he grows tomatoes, peas, corn, strawberries, onions and jalapeños, among other things.

"We had two big scares with produce last year — jalapeños and tomatoes," Spirko said. "First jalapeños had salmonella, and then tomatoes had salmonella. If that can happen, what other things can happen?"

Gwenn, 52, a self-described "girlvivalist," runs a lodging house in Beaumont. She has plenty of water, a year's worth of food and a shotgun for protection.

"When we had Hurricane Ike here, a lot of my tenants didn't evacuate," she said. "While my neighbors were standing in line for MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] at the shopping center, we were grilling steak."

Keeping it quiet

Many survivalists — Spirko is not one of them — are "closet preppers."

Afraid that they will be viewed as crazy or weird, they don't tell people they are storing freeze-dried food, canning their own vegetables or setting up an alternate location where they can go if TEOTWAWKI arrives. They also don't want "raiders" beating down their door if a disaster happens.

Bob said survivalists are often viewed — incorrectly — as doomsayers.

"Some people think we want the end of the world as we know it," he said. "I can tell you from my heart, I hope nothing like that ever happens. I want my sons to grow up and have a great life."

Still, Bob believes that everybody should at least have a 72-hour bag of gear, also known as a "bug-out bag," ready to go.

"Survival today is more about being prepared for short-term situations, like hurricanes, floods and blizzards," Bob said. ". . . Learn some basic skills like gardening, first aid and personal defense. Become self-reliant like our grandparents were."

Jordan Mills, 30, an information technology contractor in downtown Houston, put his bug-out bag to good use during Hurricanes Rita and Ike. In it, he keeps his birth certificate, medical records, cash, food, water, flashlights, tape, garbage bags, clothes and other supplies.

Mills said he didn't choose the "survivalist" label, but others have called him that.

"The word brings to my mind an image of a gruff mountain man with a log cabin, 10 years of food stored up and enough guns to outfit a small army," he said. "I don't meet that image at all. I consider the chance of a total collapse of society and the end of the world as we know it to be pretty much zero. To me, survivalism is really just preparing for day-to-day inconveniences or emergencies."

A growing community

Every morning, Spirko gets in his diesel Jetta and makes the 50-mile commute from Arlington to Frisco, where his media company is based.

During the drive, he records his daily podcast. He discusses things like storing food safely, finding alternative energy options, dealing with anti-survivalist stigma and finding time to prep.

"The more I dug in, the more I learned," he said. "And then something really cool happened: This community started to build around it."

Spirko said that about 4,000 people download his podcast each day and that his audience is growing.

"People are always waiting for someone else to come and help them," he said. "To me, survivalism is just waking back up to traditional American values. I'm talking about basic self-responsibility, basic self-worth — understanding that you control your life more than anybody else."

"If you do nothing, you may not regret it. But if you do regret it, you are *really* going to regret it."

Resources Best Prices Storable Foods in Quinlan, www.internet-grocer.net

Radius Engineering, www.bombshelters.com. Buy McCarthy's book, *Principles of Protection*, there or from the American Civil Defense Association.

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