

Guest Column: Guns have changed everything, especially childhood

May 24, 2023



I learned to shoot on the family ranch, as ranch kids are wont to do. My gun education was furthered at a Catholic summer camp, and I still have my paper target proving my marksmanship. Hunter safety classes, and calm, clear-eyed common sense. This was the rural approach to guns I grew up with.

Then it's a story we all know: Guns became politicized. Polarized. Lobby-ized. Humans are good at inventing things, so guns got more militarized as they turned into weapons of mass destruction. Our laws, sadly, didn't keep up, because humans can also move quite slowly.

Then, I had children, and suddenly, active-shooter drills were part of their curriculum. And then, on Valentine's Day 2018, parents across Fort Collins, Colorado, received emails informing us that our children had been in a lockdown drill at roughly the same time that 17 children were being killed in Florida.

My brain fritzed out with confusion: Here a drill, but in Florida, children were being mowed down. Relief, and yet also great grief. Other mothers were getting different news.

My kids came home, stunned, and recounted their drill instructions, which included advice such as: “If you must fight to save your life, fight with all your might, using anything within reach as a weapon.”

Yes, kids, please fight with all your might against a grownup with a semi-automatic.

What a sad curriculum. What a sad country. Many of us know this. Many of us keep saying the same thing over and over, and a few loud voices keep pushing back. Why even discuss interpretations of the murkily written Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, written at a time when muskets were the weapon of the day? Some conversations aren’t worth having.

What I am interested in is brainstorming real solutions—with like-minded people who also felt a real crack in their hearts every day that innocent people are mowed down, which, it seems, is nearly every day. A day without a shooting now seems the exception.

It strikes me that besides gun zealotry or idolatry, the other tragedy here is our seeming unwillingness to act. Really act. Act like grownups. My daughter and friends helped organize a walkout to protest gun violence, which spread to other schools. Kids poured out of the high schools and toward the town center, and parents rode their bikes or walked alongside — especially near the coal-rolling trucks filled with counter-protesters that heckled them from the roads.

This was the first act of civil disobedience for most, borne out of a mix of desperation and courage.

Even as the kids gathered to pass the mic and speak, my heart was sunk even lower. Why? I knew what you know: Nothing would really change. Not until the adults of this country protested seriously, left work, took to the streets. The students protested, marched, wrote letters, made calls, and I watched, knowing. Adults wouldn’t go the distance. There’s not enough will.

It’s ironic: I grew up with guns, but my salient memory of childhood was peaceful summer walks through a green field, carrying a .22 to go practice shooting. Tragically, that is not true for youngsters today. They might not shoot as much, but they’re the ones forced by our irresponsibility and inaction to have it forefront in their minds and hearts.

So, solutions. I celebrate Moms Demand Action, a group founded by a mother of five right after the Sandy Hook tragedy, based on her belief that all Americans should do more to reduce gun violence. No group has “risen so far, so fast, influencing laws, rattling major corporations, and provoking vicious responses from hardcore gun rights activists,” according to Mother Jones.

Although I’m all for background checks and safety locks, these seem like tiny bandages on a gaping wound. The big thing we can do is ban assault weapons immediately, and, even more importantly, elect gun-sensible politicians who don’t take NRA money.

If not Moms Demand Action, there is the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and Gun Owners for Safety. All these groups need people willing to spend some time calling legislators, step up, protest. People like you. People who believe in common sense. People who believe in childhood.

Laura Pritchett is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She is the author of several novels and nonfiction books and directs a program in nature writing at Western Colorado University.