

THE 40% PROJECT\*  
An Oral History of Gun Violence in America

&

*The Survivors*  
A Documentary Play Based on the Interviews

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*\*40% refers to the fact that at least forty percent of Americans will either be shot or know someone who has been shot in their lifetimes.*

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## Preface

My original goal in creating an oral history project on gun violence and its aftermath for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (I was a founding member in December 2012) was first and foremost to give people a voice in what I saw then and still see as a public health crisis. I also wanted to create a unique archive for scholars and public health officials to draw on, an especially urgent need considering that Congress has disallowed the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) to conduct research into the public health effects of gun violence since 1996 because of the lobbying efforts of the NRA.

I am happy to relate that what has become “The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America,” will be housed at the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA) at Columbia University. The notion of “giving people a voice” has turned out to be, however, only a starting point, as my oral history has evolved from a traditional filling-in-the-gaps and finding-an-archive oral history through a series of public-facing projects. These projects have included a three-dimensional exhibit, written profiles, radio-inspired audio stories, postcards to send to politicians, a conference presentation, and finally, a documentary play.

To date, I have interviewed fourteen people, nine while at Columbia since September 2017, and five for Moms Demand Action in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Because this is a small sample, it is tempting to believe that the evidence I provide here is merely anecdotal. Yet stark themes revealed themselves almost immediately, which I discuss in full in the Reflection Essay, below. I will mention only one here. There is a popular myth that resonates in American culture because its roots are in the heroic figure of the lone cowboy and the hardboiled gumshoe detective for whom

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<sup>1</sup> I am including legal release forms and all supplemental information for the interviews since 2017 only, as those are the ones that I am allowed to deposit in the CCOHA. I have, however, included interview material from both sets of interviews in my documentary play, and have re-interviewed one narrator, Kenny Barnes, for “The 40% Project”; I am endeavoring to do the others. I owe CCOHA a total of thirty interviews, which I hope to conclude by 2021.

a pistol is a necessary accessory.<sup>2</sup> He only shoots bad guys. And he never misses. This heroic myth is important, because current policy is partly based on it.

NRA executive vice president Wayne LaPierre first enunciated “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” fantasy in a press conference in December 2012 after the massacre of twenty-six first graders and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut. It has since been printed on NRA T-shirts, but more importantly, to push more guns-everywhere legislation, including the arming of schoolteachers. How gun violence unfolds in real life, however, is sheer bedlam. To name three examples from my interviews: Kareem Nelson had a handgun with him when he was shot in the back in East Baltimore and paralyzed; he has never identified his assailant. Rachael Joseph’s Aunt Shelley was not only in a courthouse in downtown Minneapolis when she was shot, she had hired an armed security guard to protect her from the very person who killed her. The frightened guard ran away, and Shelley was shot four times in the bathroom and died soon thereafter. During Kate Ranta’s nearly fatal domestic violence dispute, armed police with bulletproof vests surrounded her apartment near Parkland, Florida, but they asked Kate, her father, and four-year-old son to come out (her armed ex-husband was still inside with them), although both Kate and her father were severely wounded; the police did not enter the house and did not prevent the shooting. As Kate said, “It’s not like the movies.”

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<sup>2</sup> Right-to-carry laws, for example, increase rather than decrease violent crime, according to a National Bureau of Economic Research study, and higher rates of gun ownership are correlated with higher rates of both homicide and suicide. See John J. Donohue, et al., “Right-to-Carry Laws and Violent Crime: A Comprehensive Assessment Using Panel Data and a State-Level Synthetic Control Analysis,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 23510, June 2017. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23510> and Michael Siegel, MD, MPH, et al., “The Relationship Between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981–2010,” American Journal of Public Health, November 2013. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301409>

The oral histories in “The 40% Project” include people from New York City to suburban Florida to rural Louisiana to sprawling Phoenix to small town Washington State. They include people who have been injured and survived and those whose loved ones have either committed suicide or been killed. They include women and men, sons, fathers, wives, girlfriends, young single men, divorced, middle-aged women, widows, nieces, mothers and friends. They are both African American and white (although neither Latinx nor Native American nor immigrant – so far). Two of the white mothers I interviewed about daughters who had been randomly killed are married to African American men; their daughters were biracial. All are life story interviews. I focus on where the survivors are from, sense of place and home, family, faith, education, the gun violence itself, and its aftermath.

For a long time, the differences between the people and their stories combined with the complexities of the issue stymied me. Unlike many oral history subjects, gun violence is not finite but ongoing; it is not localized but national; it does not represent one event but hundreds of events every single day. I wondered: what does domestic violence have to do with poverty-related violence, or either have to do with suicide? I finally decided that access to guns and the ensuing violence and trauma were the common denominators that mattered most. I also found the silence surrounding the victims and their stories to be peculiar.

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*. ...[Yet] remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 2015. For more discussion about silence, trauma, and ethical loneliness, see my Exhibit Reflection, *below*.

While I am collecting stories from people who describe their lived experiences of a certain time and place, those lived experiences are not exactly past. What I have found is that the aftermath is ongoing and permanent. In every interview, I also ask about gun ownership and feelings about the Second Amendment. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the victims have never even held a gun themselves, and none – not one, even those who grew up with guns – has ever considered the Second Amendment to be important.<sup>4</sup>

### Acknowledgements

In the introduction to my play, I wrote: I could not have written this play without the invaluable feedback of New York playwright Andrew Bragen, who I want to thank for his time and insight, and for introducing me to the craft of playwriting and pushing me to find the essence of the story I am trying to tell. I am also indebted to artist and writer Nyssa Chow, who taught me that intention is meaning in art, the difference between describing and evoking, and how to think about what people need to know to make them see what I am trying to convey. I also want to thank the director of the Oral History Master of Arts at Columbia University, Amy Starecheski, for always supporting me through every iteration of this oral history project, for introducing me to activist oral history, and for teaching me how to slow down and truly listen.

I would like to further acknowledge and thank both Zoë West, for introducing me to the complexities of human rights testimony, and Mary Marshall Clark. Without Mary Marshall's guidance, I would not have learned how to interpret a text, a deeply meaningful and useful aspect of oral history process. Mary Marshall also taught me how to think about my own approach to oral history and has supported me with much kindness. Thank you all.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the original intent of the Second Amendment, see Constitutional scholar Saul Cornell. "Although each side of the modern debate over firearms claims to be faithful to the historical Second Amendment, a restoration of its original meaning, recreating the world of the minutemen, would be a nightmare that neither side would welcome. It would certainly involve more intrusive gun regulation, not less. Proponents of gun rights would not relish the idea of mandatory gun registration, nor would they be eager to welcome government officials into their homes to inspect privately owned weapons, as they did in Revolutionary days. And gun violence prevention advocates might blanch at the notion that all Americans would be required to receive firearms training and would certainly look askance at the idea of requiring all able-bodied citizens to purchase their own military-style assault weapons. Yet if the civic right to bear arms of the Founding were re-introduced, this is exactly what citizens would be obligated to do. A restoration of the original understanding of the Second Amendment would require all these measures and much more. The minutemen ideal was far less individualistic, and far more martial in spirit, than Americans today realize." See Saul Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia: The Founding Fathers and the Origins of Gun Control in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

# The Survivors

A Documentary Play

By Holly Werner-Thomas

## Introduction

*The Survivors* is a documentary play that began as an oral history project about the toll of gun violence, a little researched but enormous public health issue.

More than 1.5 million people have been killed at the end of a gun barrel in the U.S. since 1968, which is more than the number of all American soldiers killed in battle since the American Revolution. Millions more – 70,000 a year on average – are injured. And for every injury or death are many more people whose lives are forever fractured.

Yet we don't often hear about the reality survivors of gun violence have to live with, from the original trauma of being shot or losing someone to gun violence, to the mostly invisible aftermath of that trauma, including drawn-out legal battles, lost earnings, and lifelong medical and psychological complications. Gun violence survivors also experience the feeling of being left behind in a culture that simply moves on and by laws that failed to protect them. This is true after a mass killing when the media swoops in, only to leave again soon thereafter, but it is even more often true for private gun violence (domestic violence, crime, accidental shooting, or suicide) which accounts for 95 percent of all shootings across America. With at least 110,000 Americans shot on average every year, I wondered: Who are the survivors and what are their stories?

My oral history – *The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America*,\* which is housed at the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA) at Columbia University – evolved into a documentary play after I watched The Tectonic Theater Group's *The Laramie Project*.

I realized that at least for activist oral historians focused on current events or the recent past who desire to spark dialogue, hold a mirror up to society in an effort to reveal truths, or promote social change, documentary theater represents a remarkable opportunity to reach people. The immediacy of the spoken word and the occasion for deep listening – two goals oral historians strive for – are abundant in theater.

Like people everywhere who have survived everything from hurricanes to genocide to cancer, Americans affected by gun violence call themselves survivors. These stories are theirs.

*\*40% refers to the fact that at least forty percent of Americans will either be shot or know someone who has been shot in their lifetimes.*

~

## Notes

This play requires a cast of fourteen adult actors.

The fourteen survivors will remain on stage the entire length of the play, except Nelba Marquez-Greene, who comes in only at the end (and consequently could be played by an extra).



Except where indicated, they speak to the audience rather than to each other.

Props/objects and spaces to consider but not necessarily incorporate include: a telephone, front doors, walls, windows, living rooms, bedrooms, hospital and police interrogation rooms, funeral parlors, porches, beds, gurneys, stretchers, police tape, tables and sofas, flowers and candles.

Sounds to consider but not necessarily incorporate include: a telephone ringing, a hard knock at the door, rain, cars driving, sirens and helicopters.

The use of silence merits its own category.

Physical action to consider: falling down especially, but also sitting and lying down; the physicality in the storytelling.

Spatial positioning & arrangement to consider:

Act I: from merely observational to untroubled; distinct physical communities

Act II & Act III: from shock and horror to isolation, discomfort, unease

Act III: also frustration, pain; finding emotional community

Where props or objects are used, the survivors should lift, carry, and move them themselves in order to make the mechanics of the theater more transparent. In the same vein, they could also read from the transcripts at times, or invite audience members to read from them.

~

#### A style guide of some unconventional theatrical elements

UPPER CASE denotes emphasis.

*Pause* indicates a short pause and is used when the same character is speaking.

*Beat* indicates a longer pause and is used between two characters speaking.

~

#### **Dedication**

This play is dedicated to Eddie Weingart, who committed suicide in 2017, and whose death, more than three decades after his mother was murdered with a shotgun, does not register in the system as linked to gun violence. Those who knew him know better.

## **THE SURVIVORS** (*in alphabetical order*)

Kenny Barnes, Sr., African-American man, seventies  
Chris Behner, white woman, late forties or fifties  
LaShea Cretain, African-American woman, early forties  
Betsy Dale Adams, white woman, early sixties  
Kim Gatbunton, white woman, early fifties  
Rachael Joseph, white Jewish woman, forties  
Kareem Nelson, African-American man, early forties  
Deborah Parker, white woman, sixties  
Tom Sullivan, white man, forties or fifties  
Kate Ranta, white woman, forties  
Judi Richardson, white woman, forties  
Kim Russell, white woman, early forties  
Eddie Weingart, white man, late thirties  
&  
Nelba Marquez-Greene, Latinx woman, thirties

### **PLACE**

Here.

### **TIME**

Now.

### **Acknowledgements**

I could not have written this play without the invaluable feedback of New York playwright Andrew Bragen, who I want to thank for his time and insight, and for introducing me to the craft of playwriting and pushing me to find the essence of the story I am trying to tell. I am also indebted to artist and writer Nyssa Chow, who taught me that intention is meaning in art, the difference between describing and evoking, and how to think about what people need to know to make them see what I am trying to convey. I also want to thank the director of the Oral History Master of Arts at Columbia University, Amy Starecheski, for always supporting me through every iteration of this oral history project, for introducing me to activist oral history, and for teaching me how to slow down and truly listen.

Finally, I want to thank the survivors themselves, who trusted me with their stories. As one of them, Deborah Parker, told me: Instead of just sharing my story to get attention to Lindsay's case, I realized that my story could bring attention to the entire problem of gun violence in this country. So, I share my story to make people aware of how personal this is.

~

## Prologue

TOM SULLIVAN (*A short middle-aged white man with a mustache wearing khaki pants, potentially holding an 8½x11 photocopy of his son, Alex.*)

When Columbine happened, I sat here in my front room just crying, because I had two kids who were in school that day, and I'm trying to imagine being a parent on the outside with your kids in school not knowing anything. Aurora is only seventeen miles from Littleton.

When Alex and Megan came home that day, I hugged them and told them how much I loved them. I tried to reassure them. I said, 'We'll keep you safe.'

In 2012, I was working at the post office, and normally left the house by 4:30 AM. Before leaving, I would watch Sports Center to find out all the scores from the night before. That morning, there was breaking news about the shooting. I knew Alex probably went to the midnight show for his birthday the night before, but still assumed he had gone to another movie theater, closer to where he worked. I called him anyway so that I could write a note to my wife, Terry, not to worry. Alex's phone rang and rang. I didn't worry, though. I assumed Alex was asleep, so left him a message to call his parents, and wished him happy birthday. Then I went to work.

I drive right by where the theater is. It's like two blocks over. And I can see helicopters up above.

I turned on the radio. Ten dead in the theater and two on the way to the hospital.

So, I called him again, and said, 'Hey, give me a call. I'm on my way to work. I'm going to call you every half hour till I hear from you.'

At 6:30 AM, Terry called.

So, I tell her, 'Don't worry, I've been calling him all morning, he must be sleeping,' and she kind of interrupts me, and says, 'Alex has been shot.' And we lost connection. My phone went dead. She called back, and said to go to Gateway High School, that's where they were meeting. It was about a five-minute drive, and I was pretty much crying the whole way. I got there and ran inside.

Between 6:30 and 10 AM, we could not find Alex or obtain any news about him. When I arrived, no one could give me any information about who to talk to or where to go. Around 9 AM, I decided to go to the hospitals myself, and a police officer was assigned to take me. Two of Alex's friends followed in another car. I noticed all of the media there, and showed them an 8 ½ x 11 printer photo of Alex. I shouted out my cell phone number as I left. I called and visited 10 hospitals. Finally, after speaking with an emergency room nurse about everybody who had been injured or killed at the movie theater in all of the area hospitals who said there was no one named Alex Sullivan on any of the lists...

I realized: He's in the theater, and he's not going to come out.

*Pause*

I didn't know before Alex was killed that you could just pick up 100-round magazines, or an armful of 30-round magazines legally. I mean I personally can't tell you where I could buy assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, but, apparently, they are available—they're all right around me. And I didn't know that.

I'm just a Dad. I'm a Dad of a son who was murdered by a guy with a hundred-round magazine in a movie theater on his birthday.

*Pause*

Alex was working two jobs when he was killed, one of them at Red Robin.

*Pause, quietly*

He could shave a radish to look like a little rose.

*KENNY BARNES, SR. (A tall African American man in his seventies dressed in a suit and tie with a raspy voice as he suffers from emphysema and asthma. He uses a long seeing eye walking stick as he is mostly blind.)*

The number one killer of African American boys and men today, ages 15 to 34, is death by gun violence. It's an epidemic, yet it's not even being addressed. Imagine if the number one killer of white males today, ages 15 to 34, was anything, much less death by gun violence. It would not be taking place.

It's not just about mass murders and white people getting killed in America. If you want to talk about that, fine. But if you really want to truly talk about the impact of gun violence, it's far more complicated.

*KENNY pauses to adjust his voice and stance from exposition to storytelling mode, where he begins quietly before yelling.*

Yeah, it was raining and uh, we went down to the store. Kenny owned a clothing boutique on U Street just before that whole area became gentrified.

This was in September 2001, ten days after the terrorist attacks. It was tense. It was eerily quiet.

I go down to the store, and there's yellow tape, and I think one or two police officers, no more. No TV cameras, no nothing. And I remembered that somebody had gotten killed in Georgetown, and man, it was all over the front pages, news cameras, they were there looking at the store. They were there that night. And my son is murdered—and nothing.

I said, this is ridiculous. Every life is sacred. Every death to gun violence should be equally important.

This cop walked up to me, and he said, 'This a crime scene.' Uh, you know, 'Somebody got murdered here.' And I said, 'I know. He was my son.' And that cop said then, (*flippant*) 'Well you know what the deal is.'

*Pauses*

*You know what the deal is?* And I said, 'What the fuck are you talking about? 'Cause I don't want to hear nothing from nobody now.' So he had his partner with him and all. I said, 'What the fuck you talking about? I know what the deal is?' '*Well you know what happened.*' I said, 'No, officer, tell me what the fuck you're talking about. 'Cause I'm ready to kill or be killed now. Tell me what the fuck you talking about.' And so, the other officer said, 'Mr. Barnes, okay now calm down.' 'No, don't tell me to calm down. Tell this MOTHERFUCKER to explain to me what the FUCK he talking about that he knows and I know what the deal is. Explain that shit to me. What you talking about?' All right? So the other office said, 'Mr. Barnes, please calm down. We know you're upset.' Now, in the meantime, I guess this officer, he's not knowing really what to say anymore. I said, 'Don't get quiet. Tell me, explain that to me. What do I know?' And I said, 'Let me, let me tell you something for your information, you stupid bastard. Let me tell you something for your fucking information. I go to Loyola. I'm in my third year working toward my doctoral degree. I'm going to school in Baltimore every day. So, tell me what the fuck that I know what the deal is?'

I knew what he was talking about. That his assumption was that my son had to be, because he's black, he had to be involved in some kind of criminal endeavor, and therefore I must know what the criminal endeavor is, because I'm his father. That's what he was talking about.

## ACT I

### AMERICAN DREAMING

#### Scene 1

KIM RUSSELL (*40-something white woman in good shape with short blondish hair and blue eyes; bohemian stylish*)

Both of my parents grew up pretty poor around East Point, Georgia, which is a little town, I guess, southeast of Atlanta, and they met in high school and got married really young. My mother got pregnant when she was 16. And my father, uh, just was resourceful and probably a little lucky. They found property that was south of Atlanta and moved us to the country. And we lived in a house that was kind of never finished, because he was building it. Um, but it was pretty cool at the time. We had six acres. I was always playing in the woods. I LIVED in the woods.

LASHEA CRETAIN (*a pretty African American woman in her early 40s with a bald head, or very short hair*)

Because it was the country, there was a lot of open land. So basically, on a typical day, you know, I would go to school, come home, do my homework, and then I was out in the street. This is probably, you know, up until the age of 14, 15, um, I would just go outside from three to dark riding bikes, playing basketball, playing football. I was very athletic. Um, if, you know, if we didn't have band practice—I played the flute—we just stayed outside the house just, you know, eating cupcakes or purchasing cold cuts, just having a good time and like fellowshiping and laughing.

KENNY BARNES

Um, I grew up in the northeast section of Washington, D.C., an area called Trinidad. And at the time, it was, like, basically a white community. My family was the first black family to move on that block. And now it's practically all black, but it's reverting back to being white again.

And so, around the corner from me, there was a drug store and there was a, uh, a 5 and 10. There was a little supermarket. They all disappeared as I grew up. Uh, there's a liquor store on the corner two blocks from where I grew up, and that's where all the guys would hang out, drinking liquor and talking, talking stories and all.

KATE RANTA (*40-something woman, blond, rather tall and casually dressed*)

My house was a green and white ranch, um, you know, modest, middle class. When my parents first built, I think the street ended at our house, which, obviously the town has since built through and everything, but it was really pretty remote when they first moved there. Mostly families, some older people. Super safe. We all knew each other, the families, a bunch of us. We all, you know, played in the neighborhood together. The street ended in a *cul-de-sac*.

DEBORAH PARKER (*a white woman in her early sixties. She suffers from fibromyalgia, but her physical pain is not visible until Act III. She has a slight Midwestern accent.*)

In 2003 we bought our dream house. It was in Chandler. This house was in a gated community, a brand-new house. We got to pick the floors and the countertops and the covers. And all those fun things that you wish you could do some day. It was massive. It was, I think, over 4,600 square

feet. It was ridiculous. I don't know what we were thinking. Um, we put a pool in the backyard, and it was just, it, it was our place. It was our safe haven where life was good. And we felt like our lives were just perfect. Nothing, nothing would ever go wrong. Um, we were living the dream.

KAREEM NELSON (*an African American man in his early 40s. He has a New York accent.*)  
Ocean Village was the name of the complex. Ocean Village was the name of the complex, and I believe it was on 59th Street. Yeah, 59th Street — 5715 Shorefront Parkway. And you took the A Train to Beach 59th Street-60th Street—Straiton Avenue.

Oh, it was nice. We had a terrace, the beaches in front of us. We had the beach view. We was on the 13th floor. You know, it was a complex. It was a nice complex that we lived in. It had security guards. We had a laundry mat downstairs. It was nice. I was like, wow, I liked it. It seemed safer than, you know, my environment in the city. So, you know, elevators working—clean.

*Pauses, Sighs*

Nah, shhh—nine times out of 10, no, no. We had to walk up the stairs.

Like I said, Manhattan was a completely different world from Queens. Like you didn't have any, like we was in the complex – 14 buildings, basketball court. You know, there wasn't much out there – the beach. You had the post office, you have one movie theater. We used to play, you know, me and my friends, we used to always play, we used to wait for the snow. We had a basketball court in the back, and then whenever it snowed, it would cover the whole court, and that's what we used to play football on there. We used to play football on the beach. Wherever we get a chance to play some football, we was playing football.

KIMBERLY GATBUNTON (*a white woman in her early fifties with short brown hair; wearing dental hygienist scrubs.*)

About two weeks before this happened to Josh – my husband is into fantasy football and Joshua would go and was part of his fantasy football league, and I don't know how much you know about fantasy football, but, it's very big, very big in our house.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

I went to an elementary school called Wilson, which is on 6th and K, Northeast. Two blocks from where I lived, there was an elementary school called Wheatley Elementary. I had to catch a bus and go by that school to go to Wilson, because there was segregation at that time.

RACHAEL JOSEPH (*a Jewish white woman in her forties with brown hair and eyes. Minnesota accent.*)

I mean, every holiday, every special occasion, was at my Aunt Shelley's house. Shelley was really the center of our family. It feels like she is, to me it feels she is so very attached – the memory of her is so very attached to that house. It's in a suburb of Minneapolis about five minutes from downtown, 10 minutes from downtown, in St Louis Park. It was on Eliot View Road.

KIM RUSSELL

I remember my mother used to always have to pick ticks out of my head every night, because I was covered in ticks all the time. There was a cow pasture across the dirt road from me. And so, we would go and play with the cows. I used to pretend that they were having birthdays and I would have birthday parties for the cows. There was a lake, there was a barn, somebody was always having a litter of puppies or kittens. There were always animals to play with. And we rode our bikes. We had a friend that had a trampoline. We just lived outside. We picked muscadines, blackberries.

Muscadines? They're, they're, uh, they're like thick-skinned grapes. They're sort of like scuppernongs.

KAREEM NELSON

So, surrounding this complex, are projects, so you had Edgemere was right across the street from us. They used to come over there, and steal our bikes, beat us up, you know, pick with us, and then go back across like nothing happened.

It was hard to go to school. It was just a mess then.

KENNY BARNES

My neighborhood was a rough neighborhood. And it was very territorial, just like it is today. Exactly like it is today. Neighborhoods are very territorial. So, if you went from one neighborhood to the next neighborhood, you could get beat up, but the difference today is you go from one neighborhood to the next neighborhood, you can get shot.

EDDIE WEINGART (*A slightly overweight, slightly effeminate gay man with a beard; in his late thirties.*)

We lived in Desert Hot Springs, California. She had just had me. This was back in the day when mobile homes were a real big thing. She bought this big triple-wide in this really nice resort and spa that had mineral hot springs. It was one of the few which was a family style resort mobile home park.

DEBORAH PARKER

This is the place I feel good, and even during the hot summer months, I just love the feeling of the sun on my face. It's just something about me. I just love it.

BETSY DALE ADAMS (*a short white woman in her early sixties, modestly dressed but with playful eyes and a slight Alabama accent*)

They were enjoying a nice summer evening, grilling hamburgers out on the deck, the beautiful deck my father built under a great magnolia tree. The evening was cooling from a hot, humid day. The birds were busy at the bird feeders hanging from huge oak trees surrounding the house.

The next day, my parents, my father and stepmother, Joyce, were going sailing for the weekend. Depending on the weather, they would either stay in the motorhome at the dock, or sail in Escambia Bay and anchor overnight in Pensacola Bay.



Escambia Bay is not as large as Pensacola Bay. Pensacola Bay is the main bay that goes out to the Gulf of Mexico.

KIMBERLY GATBUNTON

Life was a little challenging. My husband was working two jobs and whatnot. But that's, you know, that's fine. That's how it was. Um, and we, you know, we worked our way up to, to what we have today. So, but we bought our first house. We were in Lakewood, still in Lakewood, which is about thirty miles south of Seattle. We were across from the high school, actually, that the boys went to. And then, I mean life was, life was good. I always, part of what I tell them, I always tell my stories that, you know, we still feel that we were the all-American family. You know, the boys did their sports, they did stuff that they liked to do. And then we moved to the big house that we had with our, with our big dog and everything.

RACHAEL JOSEPH

You would walk in and directly ahead of you, there was a sunken living room, and if you went to the right, there were three bedrooms and a bathroom, and then on the left would be the kitchen, the dining room where we would have a lot of family dinners. And behind the dining room, there was kind of a den, like a TV room. Um, and then there was also a basement. So, when Shelley would put on just a huge family dinner with all the cousins and all the extended relatives that we maybe only see once a year for a Passover Seder, that's where it would be, because she would just set up a million folding tables, and there would be dozens of family members in her basement.

KIM GATBUNTON

Both my husband and I were both brought up Catholic. My father actually was raised in the Baptist church, but when my parents married, they agreed to raise us Catholic. So, all of us and our families went to church every Sunday, we were baptized, confirmed – the whole bit.

And my husband and I got married in the Catholic Church. And we got married in the Greek Orthodox Church, because my husband is also Greek Orthodox. His mother is Greek, and his father is Filipino. And my Mom's German. It's quite a combination. (*Laughs*) We just tell the kids that we're an American family at that point, you know?

*Beat*

KAREEM NELSON

Yeah, I mean, yeah, we grew up with guns. (*Softly, more to himself than the audience*) I've seen so many, I can't even remember. The first time? Ahh. Nah, I can't remember. The FIRST time?

*Thinking/Pause*

My family didn't have any. *My mother?* Oh, hell no.

KIM RUSSELL

My dad had rifles. He had several. And I remember them being in a, in a glass display case when you came into our foyer. I don't even know if it was locked. It wasn't for safety, that's for sure.

It was a *glass* case. But then he also had, um, revolvers. He had a, he had a Magnum 54, I guess. It's like a really huge gun. And then he had a smaller little pistol that he kept in his bedside table. And I knew it was there. I mean, I remember seeing it in his night table, in the drawer. And I remember looking—like we had, we had a phone in the kitchen and a phone in my parents' room. And if you ever wanted to have a conversation, you know, where you didn't want everybody to hear you in the kitchen, you went to my mom's room and you sat on her bed and you talked on the phone. And you just looked around, you know, and when you opened a drawer, oh! there's a gun.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

In Alabama, and in the deep south, people have guns.

KIM RUSSELL

I never really liked guns. I remember shooting a 12-gauge shotgun with my high school boyfriend, you know, just at, like, Coke cans, but I, I, I hated it. I didn't like the weight of it. It kicked back on my shoulder. It kinda hurt. Um, I just, I just didn't like it.

LASHEA CRETAIN

In Opelousas, Louisiana, which is about two hours from New Orleans, everyone had guns, obviously, because it's the country. Everyone wants to hunt.

KIM RUSSELL

There were hunters all over the place. I remember certain times of the year, you know, we had to be really careful going out into the woods or just not go.

KATE RANTA

I grew up in like a rural little town in Jersey in Lacey Township, L-a-c-e-y, and the town I grew up in is Lanoka Harbor in the Pine Barrens. I have subsequently found out, there's a lot of people with guns in that town, which—I had no idea.

KAREEM NELSON

Baltimore is a place like no other. The poverty level is just out of this world. Like, I didn't realize – poverty, I thought that, you know, when you poor from New York City, you live in the projects, but you got heat, you got, you know, you've got four walls. It's not RAINING IN YOUR HOUSE. You know, you might not have no food, but you can GET some food. But in Baltimore, it was just unreal, like.

KIM GATBUNTON

We also celebrated Greek holidays, and so we celebrated Greek Orthodox Easter, and St. Jude, which is a religious holiday. My husband's grandfather was a prisoner of war, and so he had been kept captive, and his grandmother used to pray to St. Jude, which is the saint of the hopeless causes, that her husband would be brought back. And he actually was able to make it out of the camps alive.

LASHEA CRETAIN

I mean we would shoot fireworks every holiday, you know, and we would always shoot guns. I never touched guns, but everybody else I knew had guns. It was normal to have a gun.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

No, not in my family. Not when I was growing up. I never saw any guns. I've never been around guns. No, no. My uncle was a police officer, and my uncle is very famous in the annals of D.C. police. He was the first black captain, the first black inspector. The first black deputy chief. And so, that's the only thing I knew about a gun is, he carried one.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

Everybody had guns, seems like. My family never had. My Dad had a .22 from years ago, but it was never out, and all this kind of stuff. But a lot of people just had them in the house.

KATE RANTA

Like, my parents did not own guns. Their friends did not own guns. The friends that I hung out with and I knew I, I don't know if their parents owned guns. So, it wasn't, it just wasn't part of my growing up, it wasn't a part of who I am. It wasn't part of my culture. I wasn't, I wouldn't say, you know, as a kid I was anti-gun. I didn't even—it just wasn't a part of my growing up.

DEBORAH PARKER

I grew up in Wisconsin and almost every household had a gun in it. But the Second Amendment was never a big deal.

LASHEA CRETAIN

And we definitely never talked about the Second Amendment, because I'm not sure how many rights they had back then in Louisiana for African American individuals. I'm just being honest.

KENNY BARNES

That's not a conversation black people have. As a matter of fact, I cannot think of, with all my involvement with gun violence activism, I cannot think of any black family, any black person, that has talked to me ANYTHING about the Second Amendment. WE don't think about that.

KIM RUSSELL

There was never any discussion around guns, or the Second Amendment, or gun rights. No, no, no. They were just there. They were just there. He never said, you know, you need to keep a gun by your bedside table for self-protection, or anything. But it was IMPLIED. I definitely got that sense that that's why he had it.

LASHEA CRETAIN

He came to my family home with a gun in his pocket, like he just pulled up and had a gun. He threatened me, so that's why I stopped doing everything. I stopped with my friends. I stopped hanging out, because I was definitely afraid for my life. That was my senior year in high school.

KATE RANTA

When I met Tom, and he was military, he, he grew up in Jersey, but he grew up hunting. His father hunted. I mean he had a gun at age four, or something. And then he was military, and he knew how to take apart and put back together guns and he had, when I met him, he had this like kind of showcase thing, just full of hunting rifles. I was like, Woah.

Five to seven rifles. And he sold them all on Craig's list, by the way, which is – he sold them all in the time we were living over in that townhouse in Alexandria. No background checks, all private sales. But he also had these two GIANT shotguns and several handguns.

KIM GATBUNTON

I remember sitting down and talking with him – and I can just envision this right now – and chatting with him at my in-laws' and sitting on their sofa. I mean, he had even talked about wanting to go into the military, and I said, "No, I don't want you to do that." And he's like, "Why not?" And I go, "Because I don't want you to get hurt. I don't want you to get killed," you know, "I don't want you fighting and something happening."

KAREEM NELSON

Like we used to have spots and like – if I didn't want to pay for a hotel room that night, I might stay in, you know, in a fiend's house, and wake up in the morning to see what the kids got to through.

I seen kids really plucking roaches out of cereal, eating water in cereal, nappy heads, dirty drawers, bed bugs – when it rains, it rains in the house. Like an extreme sense of poverty that I've never seen. I was, I've been to a few towns by this time in my life. And then, you know, then when I got out there it was just rough, rough in Baltimore, like.

KIM GATBUNTON

And then I said, "I'm sorry, I, I know that sounds bad. I mean, you know, my brother was in the military for a couple of years, you know, my Dad was in the military." But I'm like, "I don't want my kid – something to happen to my kid. I'm sorry." And he goes, "Mom," and he even said to me right then and there, "I could be walking down the street and something can happen to me."

And I'm like, "I know, but what are the chances?"

KAREEM NELSON

I was immune to death at this time. Like I've been dealing with – losing friends since 13. This is probably the fifteenth friend who had got killed, you know, so when my friend got murdered – a friend of mine from New York City that I was in Atlanta with. He got killed. He got murdered.

So, I said, you know what? I'm going to get closer to home, to New York. So, I went to Baltimore with my other friends.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And he, my brother's murderer – Douglas Griffin – apparently the gun was behind the door and it was always loaded.

And they knew their son was a sick man. They're the ones that sent him to the hospital. He had been in jail. He had stole from them. He had written bad checks. He had, you know, they had to deal with him for, for many, many years. They knew how dangerous he was. Nevertheless, they had a full loaded weapon in that, in that house for him to just walk in and grab.

I actually felt sorry for them. And I had empathy. I have empathy for those parents. But I, I don't understand why they would allow a gun to be out for someone that they know is not stable.

KATE RANTA

So even though Tom had a temporary restraining order against him, he was allowed to buy a gun the next day. Because he wasn't convicted. He had a restraining order, but in Florida you have to be convicted. To be put in the, in the background check system so that you're not allowed to buy a gun. So, he can have his guns seized, but they can't take away his RIGHT to buy guns. So again, giant loophole, like GIANT loophole.

KAREEM NELSON

Then I got tired of that out there because it was just too much. I have to shoot out with them every day and you had to – it was just too much.

*Beat*

LASHEA CRETAIN

Like, that's not what I ever wanted, because in spite of our arguments, in spite of the abuse, the fighting, everything! That was the last thing that I would have wanted him to do was to end his life because he has so much potential, you know? He was in high school, graduated wanting to go to college.

He had big dreams.

RACHAEL JOSEPH

I, I had this dream three or four weeks ago now, where my husband and I were looking for a house to buy and all of a sudden in the dream we were going to buy Shelley's old house on Eliot View Road. And the place that I have this nostalgia for, like, it feels like her spirit lives at that house for me. And then all of a sudden in this dream, Shelley was just there. And she looked a little different, and I've had this type of dream before, that she survived the shooting, but she looked a little different. Sometimes I have, like I said, have dreams that she lived and that's so traumatic to wake up and feel that she's here and remember, oh no, she's not. She was murdered.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

It turns out that Douglas Griffin had been in and out of alcohol rehabs and jails for years.

*A spotlight shines on BETSY DALE ADAMS, or she takes center stage, as the others move away. She is silent for a time.*

Two weeks before he murdered my brother, Pat, in 1983, he had held that same gun on a paraplegic who was his boss as a farmhand. It came out that he was, um, ever since high school he was violent. He was a troublemaker. He had alcohol problems. He was in trouble constantly. He had something like, I can't remember the exact number, something like 30-something indictments against him that were never carried out.

And then we found out that he had been in Bryce Hospital, which is a state-run psychiatric institution in Tuscaloosa, and he had been involuntarily put in that hospital that spring of 1983.

He had a psychological evaluation in there, and it came out that he was hallucinating, having delusions. He was a psychotic. He was suicidal and he was homicidal. And in there it was documented, he had sent his ex-wife a letter while he was in there, and he told her – because it came out in the wrongful death trial – ‘When I get out, I’m gonna bust out of here,’ quote unquote, ‘When I get out, I’m going to kill myself, but first I’m going to kill a whole lot of other people.’ And that was in that letter. When she received that letter, she turned it over to the people at Bryce Hospital. They had that letter. They evaluated him, and they let him out anyway.

## Scene 2

DEBORAH PARKER

My grandparents lived in Arizona and when we were kids, every Easter break we used to fly there and enjoy this lovely spring weather and the sunshine and the pools. And I knew at that point I wanted to get away from shoveling snow in Oshkosh, and I found a job in Arizona and moved down here in my early twenties.

Prior to Lindsay being shot and killed, I was working as a nurse part time, and I had recently been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. It was a very mild case, so I was able to still work and do my nursing thing. Um, since then I have been deemed disabled by the Social Security Administration because of my horrific chronic pain. My body just hurts. I have severe PTSD, and I take medicine for all of it. So, I’m a well-medicated person.

I had to have back surgery, which failed, and I have ended up with a spinal cord stimulator, which has lessened my need for pain medications greatly, which is a relief. I don’t want to be in a fog all the time because I have my granddaughter to raise. I want to be present and participating. So, I’m doing better as far as that goes, but I still have nightmares. I still am very hypervigilant. I still worry a lot. Um, I – I have a tough time with this latest shooting in Parkland. Last night was the first time I kind of slept since last Wednesday. And that is with medication. So: sleep. I have not had a true good night’s sleep since Lindsay was killed. So, it’s been 11 years since I slept well. And that makes life kind of difficult.

The day that Lindsay asked if I would babysit, I jumped at the idea, and I said, “Of course go out and have some fun for a change.” So, she went out with her friends, and she was just so excited. I

remember she was getting ready. She was blasting her music and dancing and singing and getting her makeup done and just excited to be doing something that she SHOULD be doing. So, she left, and I didn't think anything of it.

About 11 o'clock that night, I sent her a text and I just asked, "Are you having fun? Patrice is doing great. She's in bed, she's sleeping, we're doing great over here." And just kind of a little update because Lindsay hadn't called to check in, which was unusual for her. So, I waited a while, and I have no idea how much time a while is. I waited a while and it was a long enough time that it struck me as odd that Lindsay didn't respond. Even just a, "Yeah, I'm having fun," was what I was expecting. So, I sent her another message and I said, "Hey, just let me know what's up. Give me a call." Well, I still got no response. So, this was about 11:30 or so, and as the evening progressed my messages became more concerned and more frantic.

At around maybe 1 in the morning, 2 in the morning, I woke up my husband and I told him I was worried. I started to get that sinking feeling in my stomach, and my heart was racing. I felt nauseated, so I woke him up and said, "Tony, something's wrong. She's not answering me." And he just kind of rolled over and said, "Deborah, she's out with her friends. She hasn't done this in forever. She's fine. Just let her have fun." And I thought, okay, I'm just being a worried mom. I'm just being overreactive and I should just stop this.

And I couldn't.

The thoughts would not leave my mind. And that sinking feeling of impending doom was there. So, at about 3 in the morning I got up, I showered and washed my hair and got dressed because I knew in my heart somebody would be knocking on my door in the near future. And at that point my imagination hadn't gone to something horrific. I was thinking she was probably in an ER somewhere with something broken and they were going to tell me that one of the girls had been drinking and decided to drive and just those mommy thoughts going through my head.

So, I was laying in bed and I was dressed, and my hair had almost dried. Well, the sun was BARELY coming up and I remember it was just PEEKING through the windows a little bit and there was a hard pound at the front door. And because I was married to a cop for a little while, you kind of know what cops look like. They have a certain look to them, and the pound on the door I knew it was going to be a police officer.

So, I got up quickly, but when I got to the door, I stopped about two feet away from it and I had trouble breathing, so I just took a deep breath and I slowly walked to the door and I gradually opened it. And there were two men standing there, and they asked me, "Are you Lindsay Keys' Mom?" And I said, "Yes." And they said, "Lindsay was at a party last night." And I went, "Yeah, I know."

And my mind is starting to race thinking, *Okay, what did they do?* Maybe she's in jail. Maybe it wasn't an accident. Maybe she did something really stupid.

And he said, "There was a shooting at the party Lindsay was at." And I thought, Oh my Lord. So, she was just there waiting for police to take their statements. And then he said, "Lindsay was

shot.” And I thought, *Oh crap, what hospital do I need to go to? Am I going to be safe to drive?* And where was she shot and what are her injuries? And my nursing thinking started going into play along with my mom thinking, and my mind was going so fast, it was hard for me to hear the words that they were saying.

The next thing that one of them said was, “I’m sorry to tell you this, but Lindsay did not survive her injuries.”

And I still can’t believe somebody said those words to me. I still, 11 years later, can’t believe Lindsay was killed. At that a primal scream left my mouth that I didn’t even know I could make.

And I yelled, “Lindsay’s dead!”

Then my legs gave out on me. I couldn’t stand. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. It was hard to actually take a breath, and I really thought I was going to vomit right where I was. And so much of the rest of the day and first couple of years to follow are a blur.



## ACT II

### A PLACE LIKE NO OTHER

BETSY DALE ADAMS

They were enjoying a nice summer evening, grilling hamburgers out on the deck, the beautiful deck my father built under a great magnolia tree. The evening was cooling from a hot, humid day. Pat had contacted some of his friends and they were going to go out. It was payday. It was Friday night. Pat was recently divorced.

EDDIE WEINGART

My Dad and her had just finished a separation. A very peaceful separation and divorce. My Dad was a gay man at a time and during an era he wasn't comfortable coming out. He was expected to marry and have a family, and my mother being such a great friend, he felt safe enough to try this. And after a lot of guilt, he realized he needed to come clean and tell her.

My stepfather? Nobody knows where she met him. He was an ex-marine. He was an ex-deputy sheriff reserve officer. It was a whim of a marriage. Within weeks she was married.

KAREEM NELSON

My friend got murdered. A friend of mine from New York City that I was in Atlanta with. He got killed. He got murdered.

So, I said, you know what? I'm going to get closer to home, to New York. I had some friends in Baltimore. Um, some more friends in Baltimore, so I called them, I told them – no, no, no – Toi, my man, my friend, Toi, was going to Baltimore and he was like, Yo, do you want to go? And I was like, Yeah, I know people. We got on the bus and we left from Atlanta and we went to Baltimore. I got down there and I met up with my friends.

KIM RUSSELL

Phillip and I had dinner and I don't remember the name of the restaurant, can't remember for the life of me, but it was a fairly new restaurant in east Atlanta, and it was Italian, and it was really good. And Columbine had just happened like four days before we were out on this date. And so, we ended up talking a lot about Columbine. And I remember Philip just being really freaked out, you know, I mean, he was like, 'Kim, what if, what if I have students like that in my class, and I don't recognize that they could do that? What if, what if I can't protect my students? You know, 'How, how, how did that happen?' You know, it was just, it was incomprehensible at the time what had happened. And you know, we just remember seeing the footage. They just played it over and over again of the kids leaving the school, and kids dangling from the windows, and it was just awful.

CHRIS BEHNER (*a middle-aged white woman with blond hair and a worried brow; played by an ensemble cast member*)

After she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she somehow – and I found this going through her papers afterwards – she somehow managed to acquire three concealed carry permits – from Montana, Alabama, and Florida.

KIM RUSSELL

The warehouse party was in this part of town where, um, this beautiful old Victorian neighborhood in Atlanta called Inman Park.

CHRIS BEHNER

She owned guns that she bought at gun stores. How did this happen? I would have really appreciated it if no one sold my daughter a gun.

KIM RUSSELL

Inman Park kind of meets with, um, sort of meets with Cabbagetown, and this other big road that goes into downtown. So, it's just sort of this, this MIX where these different neighborhoods are intersecting. You've got a lot of money here, like at the time the mayor lived in Inman Park, that neighborhood. And then over here, you've got a, a, a more rundown neighborhood that was starting to get gentrified by artists and um, but still, you know, you had to be careful. Um, so this party was right where all of those things sort of met.

KENNY BARNES

When my son was murdered, I owned a four-bedroom home right on the corner of I-97 on Contee Road. Do you know where that is? The corner house right there. I owned that house. Ah, it was—it's a beautiful home. It was in a *cul-de-sac* as you come into this private community. Beautiful home, three bedrooms and a full basement, three levels, acre of land. Just absolutely gorgeous home.

EDDIE WEINGART

It was a late Sunday afternoon in February 1981. I was in the living room near the kitchen, and my mom had actually picked me up and took me outside. She put me on the enclosed porch and went back inside.

DEBORAH PARKER

And Lindsay decided to send some text messages, so she was sitting on the front porch with her cell phone, sitting on one of those old green plastic chairs that so many people had on their porch back then.

EDDIE WEINGART

In my mother's case, my stepdad used a twelve-gauge shotgun, which you can buy at discount stores, which you can open a checking account and get one for free, where you can pretty much buy and carry one anywhere easily, cheaply, and without much or any background check.

JUDI RICHARDSON (*a middle-aged white woman with medium-length brown hair, perhaps sitting next to her husband, Wayne, a middle-aged African-American man who is balding*)

We were so hopeful when we learned the police had the weapon used to shoot our daughter, hopeful that the person responsible was off the street and would be brought to justice.

#### RACHAEL JOSEPH

About two months before Susan shot Shelley and Rick, she went to a gun show and she bought an antique gun, like a five-shot .38, through a private sale for \$60 with no background check, no paperwork. I didn't know until the trial that that type of gun sale is completely legal in Minnesota. I think she went to buy a gun through a private sale specifically because she thought she wouldn't pass the background check due to her history—her harassment history, and I don't know if she would have or not, but I know that she probably thought she wouldn't. So that's why she bought the gun the way she did. And then she, we, we learned during the trial that she went target shooting and learned how to use it. Practiced.

#### JUDI RICHARDSON

Imagine how frustrating it was to learn that the police could not trace the gun because the owner sold it without keeping records of who bought it. This weapon was originally bought legally and later sold at a gun show – through the so-called gun show loophole, and the person who sold this weapon at the Maine gun show asked no questions, kept no records, and claims he 'can't remember' who he sold the weapon to. I don't understand that, you sell a weapon, and can't remember anything.

#### KIM RUSSELL

I was afraid that if we got to the warehouse party, I didn't know if they would have bathrooms, or if they would have Porta Potties, or if there would be a million people waiting. But in Georgia, you know, when you have to pee, you squat in the woods, you know, I'm not above that. So, he was like, I do too. I was like, Well, we should just kind of go here. I was embarrassed, but he seemed okay. So, he was like, Okay, I'll go this way. I was like, Okay, and I'll go that way.

#### KENNY BARNES

A tornado was going through the heart of D.C. You know, it had come through downtown, and come up through Route 1.

And so, I had a friend of mine with me, and the tornado is coming up Route 1, and we're trying to—run away from the tornado. And get away from the tornado, to get to my house.

#### RACHAEL JOSEPH

The week before Shelley had, had found another dead cat in her front yard, and she thought she had seen Susan in her neighborhood, which, you know, Susan lived in St. Paul, a good 40 minutes from where Shelley lived. Um, and she was really scared that day.

#### KATE RANTA

I was also fighting for a permanent restraining order. The judge extended it, didn't make it permanent. He just extended the temporary for another few months.

I asked for a permanent restraining order because Tom had violated it many, many times. He sent a package of creepy cards, like obsessive. Um, he created a fake Facebook account and tried to talk to me that way. He emailed the president, the CEO and the vice presidents of United Healthcare, which was my employer, and said that they have a rogue employee who's sleeping and drinking on the job. He vandalized my car, my Dad's car; one of the apartments I had moved

into, he broke into and drew a penis on the wall of William's room in like a blacklight marker, so it would show up at night.

#### DEBORAH PARKER

The first house party they went to was kind of boring. Nothing was going on, so they went around the corner to another party and it was at a house where they knew the person that lived there from high school. So, it was an acquaintance. Not a good friend, but somebody they were familiar with. And this house was lit up with beautiful white twinkling Christmas lights, because we went there to look at it afterwards. So, it looked so friendly with these Christmas lights twinkling, and the night she was there, there was music playing, quite a few young adults having fun, talking.

#### BETSY DALE ADAMS

They all met at the, basically the only club in the town, and that was at the Holiday Inn out by the interstate, out by I-65. I worked at that restaurant when I was 16, 17 years old. I worked as a waitress at that restaurant. But anyway, there was a lounge, and there was like a little boom-chee-chee band that would play there. Or sometimes just good music, and all my old friends and Pat's friends would meet out there and just, you know, have a good time. And that's where they met.

I was down in Fort Walton with my husband that night.

Daddy and Joyce, my parents, had gone to the boat. They sailed the whole weekend on Pensacola Bay.

#### KENNY BARNES

So, we get into my house, and the first call I get is from my sister, and my sister called me and said, you know, "Kenny's been shot." Now, the first thought that came to my mind, I remember distinctly, you know, he probably got shot in his arm or something and we going to be laughing and joking about this one day. That was the first thought that came to my mind.

#### KIMBERLY GATBUNTON

So, I pick up the phone and it's the hospital saying that your son's been shot. And right away, I didn't quite panic, because I thought like paint balling or something. I mean, this is my kid. He's six foot three. He's indestructible. I mean, he ran a race without a shoe.

#### KENNY BARNES, SR.

But then his wife called me and told me that he had been killed.

#### KIM RUSSELL

Um, and then this is where the order, sometimes I can't quite remember the order, if he yelled first or if I heard the pop first, I don't really know, but I was just kind of getting myself situated. But I was still squatting. And then I heard Philip yell, and I heard pops. But I don't know what he said. But I remember, it took me a second, and I thought, Well, that's not a firecracker, that's not a firecracker. Oh my God. He, he's, he's, he's, he's WARNING me! That's a warning yell.

Even though I didn't know what he was yelling. And I panicked. And I remember it almost seemed like time slowed down as I was figuring all of this out in my head.

DEBORAH PARKER

And unbeknownst to Lindsay, there were some gang members that lived in this neighborhood and five of them sat in a car down the street at the stop signs with their lights off, waiting for just the right moment.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

Pat's friends waited at the bar, at the club, and they waited and waited, and Pat never came back, so they said, Well, I don't know where he is, but we're going to go home now, and we'll meet in the morning just like we had previously planned. And the next morning he never showed up at where they were going to meet. And they went on to Water World. And that was Saturday.

KAREEM NELSON. This was Father's Day, 1995.

CHRIS BEHNER

Julie was 29 when she died last May 9th of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. She was my baby, the youngest child. And on Mother's Day last year, we had the private family viewing. That was the very last time I saw my daughter. So naturally this Mother's Day was absolutely fraught with pain and suffering for me.

DEBORAH PARKER

And I don't know what that moment was that they proceeded to come down the street slowly. There were five men in the car, and as they drove by the house, five of them opened fire on the house. One of the weapons they used was an AR-15.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And then that Wednesday, I was barely able to work. You have to feel this to understand what it's really like to lose a loved one missing. Um, words can't describe what it feels like.

EDDIE WEINGART

I remember it like it was yesterday. People say, how can a two-year-three-month-old have any memory? But I have a lot of vivid memory.

KATE RANTA

I mean, it was constant stalking and harassing and scary behavior and nobody ever, ever did anything about it, ever.

KENNY BARNES

So, we had to go by the hospital, and we had to view—he was at the hospital now, and so I had to—he was there—I never will forget. He was laying on a gurney. Right? And you know, I'm just, I got so upset that they had to admit me. I had an asthma attack. And they had to admit me and take care of me. But anyway, a minister came in there, and I never will forget the minister coming in there and telling me, you know, "You gotta turn this over to Jesus."

KIM RUSSELL

So, then I started running around this old truck, and I was shielding my face and I was yelling, 'I don't see you! I don't see you! Please don't shoot me! I don't see you. Don't shoot me.' And the whole time I'm running, he's shooting AT me.

KAREEM NELSON

I got shot. I was still conscious. I hit the floor.

KIM RUSSELL

So, I ran around this truck, and then I started to get under the truck, because I didn't have anywhere else to go. And then I heard him coming, and I thought, Well, he's been shooting at me so I could be dead, I'm going to play dead. And half my legs were under the truck and the rest of me was, was just in a lot, the parking lot. So, I'm trying to play dead. But my heart was just beating out of my chest. And I remember thinking he's going to know I'm not dead. And then so I had my eyes closed, because I was still convinced that if I saw him that, you know, that was it. So, with my eyes closed, I felt the gun on my head.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And anyway, um, that's when you, you become a different person with worry. You're just like, *Where is Pat? Where's Pat?* And you can't think of anything else. You become a different person. My father on that Tuesday, he came down to my – my place in Fort Walton. We rode out to Robin's house. She had not seen him, and my father was just shaking, and – they were so close. We were all close, but he became, he was just – no sleep, pacing. Joyce said all he would do was pace all night long. Where's Pat? Where's Pat? Where's my child? Where's my son? We were all just sick and everybody – and then the whole town became sick because it's such a small, close town. And it was all through Evergreen *Where's Pat Dale? Where's Patrick Dale?*

EDDIE WEINGART

We lived in Desert Hot Springs, California. It was a late Sunday afternoon in February 1981.

I was in the living room near the kitchen, and my mom had actually picked me up and took me outside. She put me on the enclosed porch and went back inside.

I remember her – very, very, very vaguely – trying to calm him down. And then I remember it starting up again, flaring.

It was quiet for a few minutes then, because my stepdad – my mother had recently divorced him – had come outside. I remember him passing me. I remember him looking at me. I remember the glasses he was wearing. They were prescription glasses but rose tinted. And I remember him walking out the gate.

KATE RANTA

I go out to my car and I turn on the ignition and the low tire lights come on. And immediately I knew, because he had, when he vandalized my car before, that's exactly what happened. He had let all the tire, the air out of the tires.

And so I was like, Oh shit. So, I, I walked around the car and on the passenger side, the whole tire there was a giant slash. So, he had slashed the tire. So, I couldn't leave. So, I called my dad and said, *He found me.*

#### BETSY DALE ADAMS

And then that Wednesday, lo and behold, because there was an APB out over three states, Pat's car was found in Tuscaloosa, Alabama at Northport Hospital, the same hospital that my sister worked at, which was mind boggling. But Pat still hadn't been found. There was blood in the front seat of the car. So the car was impounded at the Tuscaloosa Police Department. And then later on that night, it was about 9 o'clock at night, and the phone rang, and I answered it, and it was Daddy.

#### KIM GATBUNTON

But um, so what happened at the apartment—this is one of those apartment complexes off the highway. He was staying with a friend—at the apartment, four people drove up, two people stayed in the car, and two people went up to the apartment where Joshua was sleeping on the couch. And apparently there's a, a main door that shuts and locks, and people were not always shutting the door. There were leaving it open or propping it open with a rock, and that's how people could get in. And so, two people went up to the apartment with a gun. One of those people had just been released from “juvie” a day before.

#### RACHAEL JOSEPH

Shelley and her attorney, Rick, requested a security guard to accompany them up to the 17th floor where the courtroom was. Shelley had to use the restroom before court and asked the security guard to accompany her. She told him to stay outside the door, don't let anyone in. And then Rick knelt down. He was going to serve Susan with some paperwork to have her barred as a frivolous litigator in Hennepin County, because she filed so many frivolous lawsuits against Shelley—I believe Rick told me somewhere over 200 in the span of a year.

So, he knelt down, opened his briefcase, and when he did, Susan walked up and shot him at point blank range in the neck, and then she walked down the hall, around the corner to where the restrooms were, and the security guard saw her approaching with a gun, and he ran.

#### KENNY BARNES

I said, “Minister, no disrespect. I don't want to hear that shit now. I don't want to hear it. Because if you're telling me that Jesus Christ had something to do with this, then I don't want to FOLLOW, BELIEVE, or know NOTHING about him. If you're telling me he had something to do with this. I don't want hear that bullshit right now.” And that's what I said, I did.

Why pray for my family AFTER my son is dead?

#### EDDIE WEINGART

I remember it like it was yesterday. People say, how can a two-year-three-month-old have any memory? But I have a lot of vivid memory.

He had a twelve-gauge shotgun in the back of his truck. This was like an old hunting shotgun. And he came back in and started another shouting match with my mother when she saw the gun.

She ran down the steps around our home. And as she was reaching for me, he shot her in the back from six feet away.

She fell about four to six feet away from me, and I do remember that, and I remember that clearly.

KIM RUSSELL

And then I, he said something, I mean, all I heard was “purse.” And so, I knew he knew I wasn’t dead. And so I handed him my purse and he took the gun off of my head. And grabbed my purse, and then he put it back on my head. And at that point, it was just like, like I might as well look at him now, you know. So, I remember squeezing my hands and tightening my body and I opened my eyes, and I pleaded with him not to kill me.

And then he didn’t. And I don’t know why he didn’t because at that point I had seen his face, but he put the gun in the air, and he fired it, and then he ran.

RACHAEL JOSEPH

He ran away from her. And so, Susan then went into the bathroom where Shelley was, and she, she was alone, and Susan shot Shelley four times, and then she just dropped the gun, calmly walked – she’d emptied it – she calmly walked out of the bathroom to the other side of the government center and she was arrested washing her hands in another bathroom on the other side.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And Joyce was on the other end. And they said, “We’ve got to tell you something.” And I was in the front room where we had all these aquariums, my husband and I had aquariums, and I just said, “Ricky!” And it was this horrible, “Ricky!” and he came running into where I was, and before they could tell me, I just dropped the phone and I went down to the floor. I just went down on my knees, and Ricky picked me up and put me on his lap.

KIM GATBUNTON

And um, there was a knock at the door, and he went to answer the door, and the minute he went to open the door, he saw a gun, and he went to close it, but it was too late. They pushed in the door and shot him. And Joshua laid on the ground shot through the head, and they stepped over his body.

KAREEM NELSON

I couldn’t move, but I didn’t know what was wrong. So, I was screaming for help, and I had a hat and I asked the lady to remove the hat so I could see – a bystander whose feet I saw. She took the hat so I could see. The next thing you know, I heard the helicopters coming, and I heard the ambulance.

DEBORAH PARKER

Lindsay was shot through the cheek into her head and her brains were blown out. When the paramedics got there, she was still sitting in the chair in the same position because she didn’t even get a chance to move.



EDDIE WEINGART

The bullet went through her back, made an entrance of nine inches with the spray and literally emptied her chest out. She had a complete open chest cavity. Her breasts were gone. Her heart was in fragments. It was noted that there was zero life support that could have been given to save her life.

KAREEM NELSON

And they told me I was paralyzed.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

And when I saw him, and his arm was hanging down off the gurney, I just, I just lost it. I got so upset that they had to admit me. I had an asthma attack.

KIM RUSSELL

Philip had been shot in the back and he was lying in the grass. And he was looking, his eyes were open. He had really, really blue eyes. And um, his eyes weren't connecting. There was no connection. Technically he was alive, but I could tell he wasn't there.

EDDIE WEINGART

The thing that drove me so insane as a child was just the memory of her blood pooling up, and the smell of it. Still to this day, we're talking 1981 and we're in 2013, I can still smell that blood, that fresh, bright-red arterial blood. It soaked into my diaper. And I remember just screaming and screaming and crawling over to her, and I stayed with her.

KAREEM NELSON

I was like, 'How you know I'm paralyzed?' And he's like, 'I know you paralyzed.' I said, '*How do you know?*' He said, 'You just didn't feel me touching your feet. I'm touching your feet. You feel it?' I'm like, 'Nah.' And that was 1995.

I turned 21 in the hospital.

RACHAEL JOSEPH

I remember that feeling like I just, my whole body went hot, and my hands were shaking uncontrollably, and my mind was just racing, like, how could this have happened? How is, how is Shelley shot? Like, did I mishear him? Was she caught in crossfire somehow? Like how can someone that I know and love have actually been shot?

I don't know how, but I drove straight to the hospital only having a vague idea of where it was. And I was searching for the surgery area, so I got kind of lost in the hospital, not understanding that she was brought to the emergency room, and just going by what my dad had said she was an emergency surgery, I found – bumped into my rabbi in the halls at the hospital, and we found the emergency room together.

And when I walked in, I walked right up to my dad, and he looked at me and said, "She's dead." And I just remember like someone had just hit me in the back of the knees with a bat. I just collapsed, and my dad caught me.

*Pauses*

The thing about grief, when it's traumatic like that, I mean, I just screamed like an animal.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

I can't, I can't, I can't really explain. My son is gone, and I'm driving by myself, and my son is gone. And of course, I'm just, just tears went all up and down my face. Right? And I was thinking, I can't believe this. I can't believe it.

KIMBERLY GATBUNTON

At the hospital, I was staring at this blank wall waiting and waiting and here comes the doctor.

And all I kept thinking about was, 'Where's my son? I want to see my son.' And I don't know exactly what his words were, but that he didn't make it. And I know I was leaning against the wall and I slid all the way down and my husband hung onto my hand, and we asked if we could see him. And we went in, and he was lying on a metal gurney, just all of his clothes gone. And I wanted to know where his stuff was, and they don't let you have anything because they have to rip everything off. They take everything away. He had a gunshot wound to his head, and his eye was black and blue.

DEBORAH PARKER

I don't think I ever said goodbye to her. I didn't say my usual "I love you." And that's – that's one thing our family does is when we are parting ways, we usually hug each other and say, *I love you*. And I still feel guilty that I didn't tell her I love her that last time.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And then we both heard on the phone, "A body has been found by Camden out in the woods". And I kept trying to get out of Ricky's lap, because I wanted to get on the floor. I didn't want to sit up. I wanted to curl up in the fetal position. And, and, and he wouldn't let me go. He kept holding me around my waist.

But anyway, um, they said a body had been found.

**Scene 2**

KATE RANTA

They have a vigilante fantasy that they're going to take out the bad guy. They live in fantasy land. And they won't hear it from my experience. I'm like: Has this exact situation ever happened to you? Until it has, you, you need to sit down and just listen.

*(Takes deep breath, sighs)* So, um, my Dad went out the door and there's like a, like a sidewalk and then the, the parking lot's right there, you can see it right from my door. And he got part way up, and then he turned around and was like, 'Katie call 9-1-1! Tom's here!' And I said, 'Okay.' And he was like, 'I'm gonna stay out here.'

And I was like, ‘No, Dad just come in, just come in.’ Like I didn’t want him dealing with my ex. I didn’t want, I didn’t, I felt, I felt scared, you know? So, he came in and then everything happened really, really fast. So, my Dad came in, and my ex had already gotten to the door and was starting to push in to come in and um, both of us were on the other side, pushing against the door to keep him out.

And then all of a sudden three bullets came.

We just heard pop, pop, pop. And so, we didn’t know that there was a gun, first of all.

I thought he was just pushing in to, like, just force his way in to talk or I, I didn’t, I didn’t, we didn’t see a gun until we heard the shots. So, um, we both of us backed up from the door, like I went straight back, my dad went kind of the other, it’s a small space like this. Um, my dad went the other way, and our son, Will, who had just turned four, was standing right behind us when the bullets came through.

So, Will was kind of standing in the middle of the room and uh, Tom came in with the gun raised and shot again and that’s when my hand, like blew up. And I was still on – I had called 9-1-1, I was still on with 9-1-1. They kept asking me–I’m shot. I, like, fell on the ground. I’m screaming, begging, begging for my life. Like I went like this (*showing how she fell with her arm raised*) and like blood splattered all the way up. It was like a HORROR show. It was like the – (*at a loss for words, crying*) It’s really hard to explain.

*Pause*

It’s just, it’s horrifying. So, uh, (*pauses, sighs heavily*), um, she kept asking me – the 9-1-1 operator kept asking me over and over again for my address because I was, it was a cell phone and I just remember like repeating my address a few times and she kept asking me if there was a gun and if I was shot and I, and I, I was screaming, Yes! Um, at one point, and now I know my Dad had also tried to call 9-1-1, but he was shot, too, and um, my ex went over to him and made him like turn off the phone, like, was like, ‘Turn off the phone and push it away!’ And then he was like, BOOM! And he shot my Dad.

And I thought he died. I mean, I, I heard him grunt and I thought he died. My Dad got shot through his left arm and then point blank in his left side. So, I mean, nothing was punctured. It’s, like, unbelievable. It’s unbelievable. I mean, it was his heart and lung. It was, it just missed his lung.

And it was a Beretta nine-millimeter with HOLLOW POINT BULLETS. Tom wanted to do damage. This was not a small gun. He wanted to do – yeah, he wanted to do – he wanted to do some massive damage.

Will was in the middle of the room, jumping up and down and screaming and I fell down by the – I had a, like a bar table type thing with stools and I fell down right by it and then I scooted myself kind of like around the table.

So, I remember it got real quiet, and then, Will was like, ‘Don’t do it Daddy, don’t shoot Mommy.’

LASHEA CRETAIN

I want you to know how I lived in a coma on life support for two and a half weeks. I could not walk or talk. I had needles from my head to my feet. When I tell you I was gone, I left this earth and I came back. I want you to know what I endured, and I want you to know when the doctor said I would never walk or talk again, I’ll be a vegetable, the remaining days of my life, I want you to know. I want you to never endure this pain.

*Long Pause*

I was not in a coma for two and a half weeks. I think I was in there for about a million years. Like wherever I was at, I was not LaShea. And I, like I said, I had went through the rehabilitation, the I.C.E. room. I immediately had surgery on my stomach, I was bleeding internally, so that they removed some of my organs, like a portion of my colon – it was just a lot of things going on for my body, and I couldn’t handle it. So. And I had the five bullets in me because they didn’t remove any bullets, so I’m struggling with a lot of things going on, and they just basically left me there.

*Pause*

I just wanted to see my babies and hold them, and I did whatever it was, whatever I needed to do.

I was breathing, I started moving, you know, I was moving my fingers, my toes, like I was pushing for whatever those doctors told me to do, I did it, and I did it really well. I had my eyes open. I was alert, I was talking – not talking, I’m sorry – but I was like, because I couldn’t speak, I was just moving, and they saw the progress in me and that was because I was fighting to get out of that bed now. And then, once I got to the point after several days later, but it seems like several years later, I was able to kind of sit up, and basically when they cut my stomach, it was cut from my bra strap past my naval, so a good, um, eight inches, right? And they stapled my stomach, so when they removed other organs, but when they stapled my stomach, that was the hardest part of all because I was about 130 pounds – probably lost a lot more weight because I’m on a feeding tube at that time. But when they cut my stomach, and had just stapled my stomach back together, THAT PAIN RIGHT THERE. And I just had my four-month-old daughter, that pain on my stomach was the hardest job. I never thought I would recover, like I started giving up, because when I was able to sit up, when I was, you know, a couple days later I was able to sit up. I knew I couldn’t handle that pain on my stomach and I thought that’s how I would have to live, you know, and that’s when I talked to the doctors and they said, “Oh no, we’re going to remove the staples in six weeks. You’re going to be fine. You’re going to do this.”

KATE RANTA

I mean, I, when I say I was dying, I was dying, like I could tell, and the cops were not kicking in the door. It wasn’t like the movies. They never came in. They never tried to stop it.

So, I got up and got out and collapsed on the grass, and that's when I see all the cop cars, like the whole police department was there, and they're like, 'Katherine, can you get over to us?' And I was like, 'No! I need help.'

And then about a minute later, my Dad came out with Will, and they're like, 'Sir!' So, he's—I'm, like, head-to-toe blood. Like I remember feeling the, like my clothes, like sticking to me, like my pants. And they were, my Dad was covered in blood, and they're like, 'Sir, can you get her over to us?' He's like 68 at the time, and now they're asking this 68 year-old-man who's been shot twice to get me off the ground.

I mean they're the ones with guns and bulletproof vests. WHAT WERE THEY DOING?

So, he did, and I got up and he's like, 'Katie, we've got to go. We've got to go. Come on,' like, 'You can do it, get off the ground.' So, I did. And he got us over there behind the cop cars.

And I remember lying on the ground. He was screaming my name, my Dad. I just remember him saying, like, 'Katie! Katie!' like in a voice I'd never ever heard from him before. He was not at all worried about himself. He just was like despondent and thinking I was dying because what happened was once we got on the ground, I was so, I was so focused on the hand that we, I didn't realize, I had been shot through my breast, my left breast, and it was like gushing and so they, they, they thought – and I had no idea where Will was.

And then they determined that they thought my injuries were grave enough that I needed be choppered out. (*Perhaps via lighting and sound.*)

So, the next thing I remember is being moved onto the gurney, and then being like, pushed over, like, a gravel – I was like, 'Where the hell am I going?' Um, they had to land at like the country club that was next door to my apartment complex. That was the closest place that they could land a chopper in. It's a busy area.

And then the next thing I remember is being pushed from the helicopter on the gurney toward the hospital, and my mom and my brother there. (*Crying*) And um, they didn't know, like they didn't know what had – was – They didn't know our condition, you know, my, my Dad had been able to get through to my Mom, and was just like, 'Tom shot us,' and my Dad didn't know what my condition was, either. Um, and I just remember my Mom being like, 'I'm here, I'm here.' And I was like, I was like, 'Mommy!' you know, I was like, it was like I was a KID, you know, I just kept screaming, 'Mommy!' over and over again, and my brother was like, 'Katie, I'm here.'

LASHEA CRETAIN

And I, I left the hospital after, like I said, two and a half weeks or so, whatever. I left. I wasn't able to comb my hair. I wasn't able to hold my kids. I left there with five bullets. I left there with staples. I left there with so much pain. I never had counselors come in the room and talk to me, get me back on my feet. I never had those things. I had to encourage myself to be strong, and that was the hardest part.

KATE RANTA

And then I guess my Dad arrived in the ambulance and they had us next to each other, like with a curtain. And, and, uh, my Mom and brother kept going between us and like I just was screaming, and I was in so much pain. It hurt so much, my hand, it's like I can't even explain how much it hurts. Nobody can really understand it unless it's happened – it's like they were giving me pain medication and I was throwing it up and um, it was just awful.

LASHEA CRETAIN

And my last words to him was like, “You can always have the kids whenever you want them. I love you but I can't be with you anymore.” And I turned away, and he shot me three times from behind in my head. And he shot me another time in my hip, and another time on each hip. One bullet is on my spine, one is in my hip and I have three in my head. Not only did he shoot me, bullets flew over my children's heads. Bullets flew over his mother's head. Bullets flew over my great aunt's head. She was the one that called 9-1-1.

But prior to that he, he completed suicide on the scene.

## ACT III

### FLY AWAY

#### Scene 1

*The survivors, their sense of place and home and even, at times, of being American or the all-American family, whatever that means to them, has shifted since Act I through the gun violence that shatters their worlds and bodies, directly and indirectly, that we see in Act II. In Act III, their pain becomes visible. Kareem Nelson is now in the wheelchair he will use for the rest of his life. Other survivors reveal their physical pain by talking about it (Kate Ranta, Deborah Parker, LaShea Cretain), but they also talk about the “torture” of trial, the financial burden, and the mental anguish they have endured. They talk about what they have lost even as they have sought to make meaning of their trauma. While they are not literal refugees, they nonetheless feel displaced. Some find community in each other.*

KAREEM NELSON (*He is now in a wheelchair and wears eyeglasses and sports gear. He fiddles with his collar when he speaks.*)

I didn't have an operation. I mean, they gave me, it was a 50-50 chance. They said, We could remove the bullet, and you could lose what you have. Or we can leave the bullet in there and you could keep what you got. So, it was a 50-50, like I'm already – I already can't walk, and I couldn't move my hands when I first got shot. So I was like, Nah, I'm just going to stay as is. I ain't going to mess the situation up no more.

KATE RANTA

I was awake the whole time. At one point they, they wheeled in this, this big machine, I guess it was an X-ray. They were trying to find if the bullet was there, and I just remember them yelling, “There's nothing there!” It was a flesh wound. So, the bullet had gone in and out. It, it didn't lodge in me. But it's crazy because I was like this (*turning*). So, like, who even knows what motion I made at the perfect time that it just went through my chest and didn't – I mean, he would have hit my heart.

My dad got shot through his left arm and then point blank in his left side. But nothing was punctured. It's, like, unbelievable. It's unbelievable. I mean, it was his heart and lung. It was, it just missed his lung. Yeah.

He actually had to go to I.C.U., though, because there was a bullet. The bullet was in him and like it was, like he needed more attention than I actually wound up needing. I did need a blood transfusion because I had lost so much blood.

KIM GATBUNTON

And then, they, um, they take all of Josh's stuff, all of his – I.D., and his belongings, and his wallet, and everything else because they need to use it for the investigation.

Um, they just tell you that, you know, you're free to go. Like, nobody thinks to ask you about anything. “You're free to go,” and nobody thinks to hand you any paperwork for counseling, or

for anything else. So who do you turn to, or where do you go? Okay, what, what do we do now? You know, who do we call? What, what do we do?

LASHEA CRETAIN

I never had counselors come in the room and talk to me, get me back on my feet. I never had those things. I had to encourage myself to be strong, and that was the hardest part.

CHRIS BEHNER

A long time ago – I'm a nurse, and a long time ago, I worked in a hospital emergency room where a three-year-old had been brought in with a – with his face blown off, and of course he died. I'm still periodically having nightmares about the sound of the mother crying in the waiting room. And now, I'm the mother.

KAREEM NELSON

The nightmares, they call them phantom nightmares, the nightmares I had was ridiculous, yo, like, I used to have so many bad nightmares – somebody was pulling my arms off and beating me with my arms. (*Shakes his head*)

KATE RANTA

They sent a child trauma team in for Will, but you know, it was more monetary with us, like we could file for this compensation and victim's compensation type of thing through the state. It was monetary but not addressing our trauma. We were kind of left on our own for that.

KENNY BARNES

I haven't done any therapy. Really haven't done any sort of things as a psychologist I know I should have done, right? And I know I've repressed a lot and held a lot in me. Right? I know that. But you can see, I mean, nobody else feels the same way that I do, you know?

LASHEA CRETAIN

This month I paid \$3,000, which I don't have, but I have to pay it and to find a way, because I need to keep living. Like when you called me this morning, I was sitting in the spa at the sauna, because I have to get treatment on my back. I wake up in pain, 100 percent pain, so I have to pay to use certain services every day.

KIM GATBUNTON

And we started getting bills for the hospital and the ambulance and all these things. We owed, you know, like \$50,000 in bills.

KAREEM NELSON

The first check I ever got was a disability check, and it was \$538, and the \$538 comes once a month. So, I was like, \$538? What am I supposed to do with this? Like, really? It's supposed to last me 30 days.

LASHEA CRETAIN

Six hundred a month. Like I could do a lot of things with that. Times 21 years? That's \$150,000 right there. Easy. And I have been spending that plus more.



KATE RANTA

I wasn't really dealing with the mental health side of it, and I had massive panic attacks and triggers and nightmares, and I had no tools as to how to cope with that. And my medications weren't right. I was taking the same antidepressant that I'd always been taking.

KAREEM NELSON

I was at Mount Sinai for six months. Yeah, six months. I was suicidal. I didn't want to live. I didn't want to live. I was suicidal. Um, they had me on suicide watch twenty-four hours.

KATE RANTA

It took nine months of occupational therapy to get to my hand moving where I could make a fist.

KAREEM NELSON

Like, oh, in this position, it's a shame that, you know, sometimes you can't control your bowels. So, you'll go to the bathroom on yourself, and you know, I want somebody to clean me the way that you would want your CHILD cleaned. Would you want your child running around smelling like urine or feces? So why would you do it to me? So, you know, some of them wouldn't clean me properly. Some of them, "Oh, that's not in my job description." And, you know, just malicious people.

But I had like two good aids that stayed with me – Isabel and Gordon, you know, they were the main ones.

KIM GATBUNTON

They leave you sitting in that room, and then tell you you're done, and you can leave.

KATE RANTA

But I've seen the police interview. I've seen the interview with Will – and it's the most heartbreaking thing. I mean, if they want to raise awareness about what this does to children, that video should be shown, because I mean, he didn't know, he didn't. (*Stops*) He didn't know if I was okay. He didn't know if his grandfather was okay. He didn't know what was going on.

LASHEA CRETAIN

He said he would, um, he couldn't see me with anyone else.

KATE RANTA

It also came out that Will had, um, he had pooped in his pants during it, and the cop, the—he was sitting in it the whole time.

KIM GATBUNTON

The guy that's officiating said, "We now lay to rest Jordan." And I gasped. My son, Jordan, gasped, and like, said, "Josh!" And, like, REALLY? We've been with you almost every day. Can you not get this right?

## Scene 2

KIM RUSSELL

He was sitting behind me, and I was reading my victim's statement to the judge. So, it was just a weird presentation. And also, no one had really prepared me that like, 'Oh, you might want to brace yourself, because you're going to see the guy that tried to kill you and he's going to be in handcuffs. And in a prison outfit.' I mean, I guess I knew he would be there, but I didn't really, I didn't really think about it. I was so concerned about the statement, and wearing the right clothes, and then the press and everything else, that it didn't really dawn on me that: You're going to see the man that tried to KILL you.

DEBORAH PARKER

The trial was excruciating.

LASHEA CRETAIN

There was no trial. There was nothing.

KATE RANTA

Oh, God, I mean, it's like (*laughs*), it's TORTURE. It's torture, what they do. I mean, and it's just the system, it's the way it goes. So right after the shooting, we had a meeting with the prosecutor. And right away she said this could take four to five years. And we were like, No way, no way. There's no way it's going to take four to five years.

In the end, it took four and a half years, including one mistrial, because the jury had been talking about the case.

DEBORAH PARKER

But because it was gang related, nobody would speak up. We went six years without any charges filed, even though everybody knew who did it, everybody knew who had the gun. The vehicle that was used was found on one of the Indian reservations burned out. But luckily when the officers were going through the vehicle, they found several spent shell casings that led them to the weapons and the shooters.

KATE RANTA

There were two days of testimony. When I took the stand they had, they started out by playing the 9-1-1 tape, which was almost, it was like 16 minutes long or something, I think. And I know they did it because they wanted my authentic reaction, and I was like a mess on the stand, and I could see the jury, obviously they were right here, and the men were reacting more strongly than the women. And Tom was just like smug, you know, no reaction, no nothing.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

Yeah, James D. Hill. They called him "Dee". His name is James Hill.

I just wanted to jump across and just punch this guy and strangle him. And I did everything I could to resist that. All right? The judge charged him with three counts of second-degree murder for the three murders.

He had murdered two other people, and he had escaped from Youth Services Administration on several occasions.

As I told you, thirty-three years a piece, and a gun charge six, six years. In total, 105 years with no chance of parole at 17 years of age.

DEBORAH PARKER

I had to get medicine to keep me from vomiting while we were sitting there. My doctor was really understanding because it's not a medicine you usually prescribe on a daily basis, but I didn't want to be throwing up in the middle of the courtroom and she understood that. And the lawyers, the prosecuting attorneys, were so careful with me because I told them I did not want to see any pictures of Lindsay. I, like I said, I don't want those pictures in my head because my imagination is bad enough, and I don't want to see what reality was. So, every time that they would be putting a picture up on the big screen in the courtroom, they would tell me beforehand, so I could just put my head in my hands. Listening was awful enough, but I did not want to see.

KATE RANTA

Um, so they went to deliberate, and that took seemingly forever. So, finally they came back, and, like, we all stood up. We were, like, holding hands, and he was found guilty on all five counts, the two key ones being premeditated, attempted first degree murder. We needed that, and we got it, and we were just crying, and then we got interviewed by the media after. It was a pretty big story – the double shooting, you know, a father and daughter in front of a child.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

That's revenge, maybe. That's not closure.

DEBORAH PARKER

The gang members that were charged, their families would come to support them wearing the gang colors and making threatening gestures. When we had people testifying, they had to have some of these people leave because they were threatening the witnesses. It was just horrible. We had to be escorted out with police officers to our vehicles for our own safety. My address was on alert with the 9-1-1 system in case they ever got a call from my house that they were there to show up with extra officers, with SWAT, with whoever they could send, because we were at risk for our lives.

KIM RUSSELL

And so, then I read my statement, and then I sat back down, and I was emotional and then he stood up, Trevellis stood up, and he said, 'I'm not a monster, Ms. Parker!' So that's my maiden name. He said, 'I'm NOT a monster, and I'm going to write to you. I'm going to write you a letter. I didn't mean it. And I'm sorry. I'm not a monster.' And he kept saying it over and over and over again. (*Quietly*) And then he was sentenced, um, to life.

### Scene 3

KENNY BARNES, SR.

Now, this is the part that a lot of people don't know about, either.

TOM SULLIVAN

I don't know what else to do. I'm just continuing to do my job as a father.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

You know, when you lose a child like that, you do things and you go to lengths, you know, you maybe lose money. You may start drinking. You may use drugs. You may spend your money on stuff, trying to do stuff, and it affects the family financially.

TOM SULLIVAN

That other side is very loud. That's the only issue that they want to discuss. Then that will be my only issue. I'm just continuing to do my job as a father.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

I was putting my money, the money that I'd saved up, I was trying to save his store. I ended up having to file bankruptcy, and I ended up losing my home. And this home now is worth over a million dollars.

I lost everything.

TOM SULLIVAN

As a father, when it really comes down to it, you've got one job: You're supposed to keep your kids safe. I failed Alex.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

Now, these mass murders, they're terrible. They're horrible. I'm not taking anything away from that. But the issue that comes up is these mass murders is, it's white people getting killed.

The laws that they're trying to put on the books have nothing to do with black people getting killed. Background checks, that's where people are going LEGALLY to buy guns. All right? And I'm not saying that should not occur. I am not saying that at all. Right? It SHOULD occur.

But that has nothing to do with black people getting killed, because black people are getting killed by ILLEGAL weapons. And they are mostly handguns or nine millimeters or something like that, maybe. Or 45s or 38s or whatever.

KAREEM NELSON

That life is a horror, man. That's what aged me so fast, and put grey hairs on – because I'm only 43, and I have a head full of grey hair. So, it's a bunch of horror stories with that life, man.

*Beat*

*This is where the survivors begin to find and address each other as well as the audience.*

DEBORAH PARKER

I think a big part of it was holding onto Patrice. (*Crying*) Because there were so many nights when I truly wanted to join Lindsay. I wanted to die because the pain was so overwhelming. It was hurting like no one should ever feel, and I would hold Patrice in my rocking chair on the back porch at night, looking up at the stars and looking at the moon and just talking to Lindsay and wishing she was there with me. But Patrice got me through it because I knew I couldn't kill myself.

KIM GATBUNTON

I think for me, having my husband and I being each other's rock, you know, is a big part of it. Um, and I think if I hadn't found a way to speak out, if I hadn't found the Survivor Network, I don't think – And, and before that, if I hadn't found the victim group that I was in. I was in Violent Crime Victim Services – if I hadn't found some kind of a way to talk about what I was going through, I don't think I would've been able to persevere. So.

KAREEM NELSON

My doctor, man, my doctor. My doctor. One day he said, Yo man, listen, you got to stop being selfish. I'm like, Selfish? I'M the one that's injured. He's like, Nah, man, you, you, you already injured, and you still causing your mother pain by you doing this dumb stuff about you want to kill yourself. Stop being selfish. And I was like, I analyzed it. He's like, Yo, stop being selfish. And I stopped being selfish. Then they started, you know, easing up with the suicide watch. Then I was off of it.

And my mother. My mother's a prayer warrior. I've been through so much, man, like I ain't supposed to be alive. You know, I'm alive through her prayers. You know, and I survived, I endured so much through her prayers.

My life has been SOMETHING ELSE. You will – one will read my book, and be like, He is a fool. One will read my book, and be like, He is strong. One will read my book, and be like, I don't understand him. But (*pauses*) – I'm still here.

CHRIS BEHNER

And I'll tell you what, I would give everything I own or ever will own for one more minute with my daughter, and I don't see why people can't give up five minutes for a gun background check.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

And I said, Chief Ramsey, I said, Chief Ramsey, I have seen you on the news—and this was the time Chandra Levy got murdered—and I have seen you on the news. You were offering all kinds of compassion to their family, and you were sad. And I'm not saying, I said, that was tragic, but our families mean just as much to us, too. Do you owe the same amount of attention to each one of our families that you gave to her?

RACHAEL JOSEPH

On my Mom's side, I do have some more distant relatives, some cousins who carry guns on them. Like on their person, and I just, I will not, if, if those cousins are going to be at my grandparents' house, we just don't go. These distant cousins, I don't want to even start the argument with their husbands who are the ones that carry the guns all the time because, you know, we're talking about folks who don't believe that Sandy Hook happened.

KATE RANTA

I was really pissed that, that this had happened at all. That I had warned many, many authorities about this happening and that nobody gave a shit, and nobody did anything until after the fact. Like, the judge that turned me down for the restraining orders gave us permanent restraining orders after the shooting. AFTER the shooting. He was already in jail. Like, thanks. NOW you believe me?

LASHEA CRETAIN

When I left the hospital, I was on antibiotics for my stomach surgery, and I left with Motrin. Motrin, I think, 800, and I walked out of there with five bullets with Motrin and some antibiotics.

Within six weeks I was back working at McDonald's. I had to go back to work.

BESTSY DALE ADAMS

And Pat went back and told his friends, 'I'll be right back. I'm giving this guy a ride home.' Pat walked out into the parking lot and there was his deputy circling the parking lot and he stopped, and he says, 'Pat, what are you doing?' Pat says, 'I'm just giving him a ride home.' And he looked at Pat and from what I understand, because afterwards this deputy got hold of me and told me this, he said, 'I told him not to do it. You shouldn't do it.' He goes, 'It'll be all right. I'll be back.' And Douglas Griffin had gotten in the car with Pat and off they went. And Pat was never seen again – alive.

RACHAEL JOSEPH

The last time I saw Shelley alive was Rosh Hashanah dinner in 2003, which was a Friday night, and then she was murdered on Monday morning at the courthouse – and I found out during the trial, my family and I did, that Susan had actually been at our synagogue that Friday night with the gun in her purse looking for Shelley. So it almost happened at the synagogue where my family has this long history, where Shelley and my dad and my uncle all went to preschool, where Shelley was on the board, where I went to preschool, where my cousin, Jennifer, went to preschool, where my kids go to preschool. And one of the rabbis there recently told me that she, Susan, actually had to be removed that night, that she caused some kind of a scene.

CHRIS BEHNER

Julie was 29 when she died last May 9th of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. She was my baby, the youngest child. And on Mother's Day last year, we had the private family viewing. That was the very last time I saw my daughter. So naturally this Mother's Day was absolutely fraught with pain and suffering for me.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

Now, to show you another coincidence, James Hill grew up right around the corner from me. I know his father. So, he lived maybe two blocks from where I grew up. And then, my son is buried another five blocks from where we grew up, in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, you know.

DEBORAH PARKER

And that night she handed me Patrice, finished getting ready, and she yelled at me and said, “They’re here,” and went out the front door. I don’t think I ever said goodbye to her. I didn’t say my usual “I love you.” And that’s, that’s one thing our family does is when we are partying ways, we usually hug each other and say, I love you. And I still feel guilty that I didn’t tell her I love her that last time.

LASHEA CRETAIN

I’m still living with these five bullets for life.

EDDIE WEINGART

People say, how can a two-year-three-month-old have any memory? But I have a lot of vivid memory.

KATE RANTA

But regardless, it’s like he, he witnessed it from start to finish, and I mean, yeah, he was four, but I mean, he, he remembers – he remembers everything.

*Beat*

KAREEM NELSON

I didn’t even see—I was conditioned to chase this money at all means, whether it cost me my freedom, whether it cost my mother her freedom, our lives, or whatever. And the pursuit of the money, in my mind, in hindsight was always going to, um, compensate for me not making it to the NFL.

Or it was going to provide me with the riches to move my mother out, to have the big house. All the delusions. Insanity. Because, as you think about it, and I tell you my story, and you hear this story, my stories are not any different from any inner-city child. I might have got shot and survived. But every inner-city child has heard these stories or lived through these stories.

KIM GATBUNTON

So yes, we had court proceedings, and we had all these things, and it took almost three years for us to get what people call ‘closure,’ which is never closure. You know, everyone goes, ‘Well, at least you got some closure.’ And I say that you never get closure. I mean, yes, they go off to jail, they go off to prison, but do you ever really get closure? I mean, your, your child or your loved one is gone. They’ve been taken by gun violence, and there’s never so-called closure, I don’t think.

DEBORAH PARKER

My friends had pretty much disappeared because it's uncomfortable for them to talk about what happened, and they weren't comfortable with me crying. And some of them got to the point where they thought I should have gotten over it by now.

Well, when your child gets her head blown apart and she's dead, there's no getting over it. It'll never happen.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

I have some very good friends that belong to Moms in Pensacola and, and they, they, they wrap around me, and they call me, or they text me and they say, "Betsy, how are you doing today?"

DEBORAH PARKER

And these are people that have either been injured, have had somebody taken themselves or have made a conscious effort to work with people and work on this effort. So, I can walk up to my friends now, and I might just have an expression on my face and not even realize it, and they'll walk up and just hold me, because they know.

And of course, I wish I had never been through this. But the people that have become my friends, I feel like they're family now. It's, it's the deepest and truest friendship that I could ever ask for.

KATE RANTA

Oh yeah, there's my life pre-shooting and there's post-shooting.

KENNY BARNES, SR.

I'll even sit around sometimes. I'll just start crying sometimes. I mean, now to this day, uh, I hold back tears even talking to you sometimes. I'm trying to hold them back.

KATE RANTA

And what's been interesting – what was interesting more early on, maybe in the first few years, was the amount of times I'd hear from, of course, well-meaning people, like, kind of like, "We miss the old Kate." Like the jokey – because I used to be really kind of light and goofy and jokey on Facebook and, and just, you know, whatever. I wasn't, I wasn't as, like, heavy, and, you know, angry about certain things as I am now. And I'll just be like, "She's gone."

I, I, I mean I can still be light and funny and laugh. It's not like I don't laugh. I laugh all the time. But I mean I'm just different. There's no way you can go through that and not, and not be changed forever.

KIM GATBUNTON

For me now it's a little bit harder because I don't have as much faith as I did since my son is no longer with us.

KENNY BARNES

See, when you talk about the devastation, there's a ripple effect that one murder creates. It's not just within your family. But it's with friends and school mates. Right? That ripple effect goes



out. It's to everybody you've come in contact with. It's like throwing a rock across the water. And there's no closure. There's not closure for me right now.

BETSY DALE ADAMS

I'm not a religious person, but I am a spiritual person, and I have felt Pat several times. And I see him in the moon. I know that sounds crazy, but I do. Um, and I can feel his spirit and he is a spirit of love. And I feel that, and I'm turning his soul, his life, his memory, his legacy, and I'm trying to help other people. I feel their pain. It channels through me. Their pain channels through me.

CHRIS BEHNER

I think about how soft her cheek felt the last time I hugged her. I think about the times that we had that were good, and the times that we had that weren't good. And I'll tell you what, I would give everything I own or ever will own for one more minute with my daughter.

JUDI RICHARDSON

We didn't lose our daughter – she was taken from us by a coward with a gun. This coward didn't just murder our daughter, Darien – he 'murdered' the family we once were, they people we once were. He murdered our love, our joy, our hope, and our future.

DEBORAH PARKER

It's physical, and when I hear about shootings, I physically feel my heart pounding in my chest. I feel my stomach rolling. I feel the nausea because I know what these families are going through, and I know the road that they have to face now.

KIM RUSSELL

And it never goes away. It never goes away. It's one of the saddest things about it, and I mean, I guess it's like that with any grief, but there's something about gun violence that's particularly violent and just so wrong.

That makes it really tough.

SURVIVOR (NELBA MARQUEZ-GREENE) *(from Twitter)*

The other day I went to the UPS store. The lady took my package, looked at it, and said, "Sandy Hook"? And then she shuddered. I said, "What?" She said, "Isn't that where all those kids died?" And I said, "Yes. And my daughter among them." And then she started crying. Really hard.

Part of the problem is we look good on the outside. We ship packages, buy groceries, work, love, vacation. But if every single person impacted by gun violence had a distinguishable outside mark, you'd realize we are everywhere and not "over there". And we are in the millions.

## Scene 5

BETSY DALE ADAMS

And then the evening came, and it was Friday. Pat would eat at my parents' house a lot because he was a new bachelor again, and Daddy was always cooking out on the grill, on the patio. Pat

went over there that evening, and he still had on his work clothes, and they cooked hamburgers out on the grill, and Pat was drinking a few beers, Schlitz, which is a horrible, horrible beer.  
(*Chuckles*)

But that was his beer, and Daddy always had scotch and waters. And it was beautiful. We always had a good time up there. In the fireplace there in the den, right before you step out to the deck, there were little chimney sweeps living in the fireplace. And Daddy was like, 'We gotta get those little devils out of there.' So, Pat got them out, and took them around behind the garage, next to the woods and a pecan tree. And they were already almost ready to fly, and Pat put them in a safe place behind the garage because he loved nature.

Pat would never hurt anything, ever. And he put them back there, and they were able to finish growing up and fly away.

**End of Play**

## Reflection Essay

1.

### Interrogating Process

#### Experimenting with Form through the Evolution of a Public-Facing Oral History Project

As I stated in my preface, the notion of “giving people a voice” turned out to be only a starting point as my original concept evolved from a traditional oral history through a series of public-facing projects. Thinking about the possibilities and limitations of each form – from a three-dimensional exhibit to a conference presentation to a verbatim play – and about what people need to know to make them see what I am trying to convey, has deepened my oral history practice by forcing me to think harder about the way we as oral historians choose to tell our narrators’ stories.

For example, for my student exhibit (“Abandoned: Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence,” April 2018), I created five-to-eight-minute audio-stories with sound effects and narration that people could listen to individually. The audio supplemented the exhibit panels, which, although they focused on the survivor stories (in summary form), also included statistics on gun violence and an explanation of what it means to feel politically and socially abandoned. Indeed, the exhibit’s metanarrative was Voice versus Silence. Moreover, I used three props – a wheelchair in front of Kareem Nelson’s banner; a carpet sample in front of Kate Ranta’s; and a plastic lawn chair in front of Deborah Parker’s, to invite exhibit-goers to embody the experiences of both those who have survived being shot (Kareem and Kate), and those who did not (Deborah’s daughter, Lindsay, who was sitting in a similar chair when she was killed.) I also offered three written profiles and other supplementary take-away information with prompts for exhibit-goers to contact their representatives.

In the profiles, I wrote a journalistic combination of summary and direct quotes. For example, I wrote: “At the time of her death, Lindsay was living back at home with her family, going to college – she wanted to become a teacher – working as a waitress to help support herself, and raising her nine-month-old daughter, Patrice, alone after leaving her boyfriend. Her mother said it was unusual for Lindsay to go out, but she had organized with two friends from high school to go to a house party and had asked Deborah to babysit. ‘I said, ‘Of course, go out and have some fun for a change.’”

I also began each piece by briefly describing when and where each person was born and raised: “The oldest of three children, Lindsay Key was born in Florida in 1987 but grew up in the Phoenix, Arizona area after her parents, Gregory Key, a former minor league baseball player and West Palm Beach, Florida homicide detective, and Deborah Parker, a registered nurse originally from Wisconsin, divorced. Deborah remarried and Lindsay grew up with her stepfather, Tony, and two younger brothers, Tyler and Matthew, in Mesa and Chandler in neighborhoods carved out of the desert floor.”

In the audio story, however, I began with Deborah Parker’s description of the night Lindsay was killed. “The sun was barely coming up, and I remember it was just peeking through the windows a little bit, and there was a hard pound at the front door.” I used sound effects – first birds chirping, then a quiet guitar plucking, then a siren, and a louder violin – to deepen the story, and I don’t narrate until after the three-minute mark. When I do, I include myself in the narrative by saying that I interviewed Deborah and explain where and why. If it were more professionally produced, I could imagine it as a radio segment in a series about gun violence.

By the time I presented at the Oral History Association annual conference in Montreal in October 2018, I was increasingly thinking about activist oral history, and had put together a paper session with the theme of influencing public discourse and policy through first-hand testimony. My own presentation was still called “Abandoned: Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence,” in which I still explained the concept of ethical loneliness;<sup>5</sup> however, the context I provided went beyond this, my first interpretation of the interviews.

I introduced the topic of gun violence and its mostly invisible aftermath within the larger context of guns everywhere by drawing a portrait of America on an average day. I culled statistics from the Gun Violence Archive, including incidents that did not result in either injury or death, to show that we are awash in a sea of steel,<sup>6</sup> before using audio clips from five of my

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<sup>5</sup> “Ethical loneliness” is the sense survivors have of not only suffering from the original trauma of being shot and surviving or losing someone to gun violence, but also what the human rights writer Jill Stauffer calls “the injustice of not being heard,” which is how survivors feel abandoned by an indifferent society in the wake of violence. See Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> The Gun Violence Archive is not a physical archive, but an online resource, established in 2013. It lists every single gun-related incident every day in the U.S., not only deaths and injuries. See

<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>

At the OHA conference, I began by summarizing an average day in the U.S., August 29, 2018. There were 140 gun-related incidents reported that day across 34 states from Delaware to Hawaii: 28 resulted in death, there were 58 injuries, and an additional 54 gun incidents reported that did not result in injury or death. Fifteen of the incidents were in Illinois, the most of any state. But Ohio and California tied for second place with 12 incidents each.

Oklahoma reported two incidents, but one was a homicide in Tulsa, the 31<sup>st</sup> homicide in Tulsa through only August 2018. Examples of injuries and deaths included: In St. Louis, a 56-year-old man was injured in a carjacking; there was a drive-by shooting in Amarillo, Texas; in Fresno, California, a man shot and injured his neighbor in a dispute a few blocks from the area high school; the shooter was a convicted felon; in Hawaii, there was a murder/suicide in a domestic violence incident; in Wichita, Kansas a woman accidentally shot herself with an AR-15; it was reported as a “negligent discharge”.

But examples of incidents that resulted in *no injuries or deaths* were just as revealing: In Florida, a girl drove her mother’s car to school and was unaware a gun was in the glovebox; in Georgia, a handgun was recovered during a meth raid; there was a standoff between a 65-year-old man and the police in Maine; a SWAT response to a caller being held against his will by gunman in Ohio; and a UPS worker in New Mexico was arrested for stealing at least 6 guns in transit. In summary, I said: This means we have guns in apartments, in cars, in schools, on the streets and on the freeways, in restaurants and UPS stores; used in car jackings and drive-by shootings, in domestic disputes, in neighbor disputes, and in suicide; we have guns going off accidentally, even AR-15s, fired by people ill-equipped to use them, and guns carried to public schools accidentally by people unaware they’re even there. Guns obtained legally and illegally – though every single gun out there is legal first. There’s no factory turning out illegal guns. *300 million guns for 300 million people.*

narrators to highlight different parts of their stories. For Deborah Parker's, for example, I used a two-minute clip on the criminal trial, which was gang-related.

I was beginning to parse out how oral history can potentially address the gun violence epidemic, and I spoke about using oral history in an intentional way as part of the process of change. I also provided an analysis of the process of influencing public discourse and policy through first-hand testimony, from bearing witness to questioning myths and deepening evidence, to building credibility and coalitions, to, finally, influencing cultural norms. (See OHA Montreal Conference Presentation 2018, Slide 18, below.)

The idea to turn my oral history project into a documentary play had not occurred to me, however, until after I watched The Tectonic Theater Group's *The Laramie Project*. My son was in the performance at his high school, and as I sat in the Black Box theater, I realized that the immediacy of the spoken word and the occasion for deep listening – two goals oral historians strive for – are abundant in theater.<sup>7</sup> I also realized that, at least for activist oral historians focused on current events or the recent past who desire to spark dialogue, hold a mirror up to society in an effort to reveal truths, or promote social change, documentary theater represents a remarkable opportunity to reach people.

2.

Contextualizing my play, *The Survivors*, within the larger landscape of documentary theater based on interviews

The process of thinking about the way we as oral historians choose to tell our narrators' stories did not end with my considering documentary theater as an outlet for this oral history. It

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<sup>7</sup> I originally wrote a blog post for the *Oral History Review* online on documentary theater and oral history performance, where I discussed the landscape of documentary plays since Anna Deavere Smith, and potential benefits to oral historians using the form. See Holly Werner-Thomas, "The Laramie Project, Documentary Theater & Oral History Performance," blog post, *Oral History Review* online for the Oral History Association, summer 2018. <http://oralhistoryreview.org/current-events/the-laramie-project-documentary-theater-oral-history-performance/>

began in my discovering the theatrical form of the piece over three main drafts. This was especially true when I realized that my narration felt distracting, and less effective, than the testimony. I learned to let the voices and the stories speak for themselves and stripped everything that might be considered supplementary context – exposition, history, commentary (even props!) – out of the play. I use verbatim interview excerpts and thematic juxtaposition only, and centered the narrators’ voices by calling my play *The Survivors*, which is what Americans affected by gun violence call themselves.

In the play, I sometimes repeat, or have the narrators repeat, certain words or phrases. I do this to reflect the way that people tell stories, which is to repeat them, at different times and different places to different people, though never in precisely the same way. The repetition also reflects the way we relive events mentally: we return to them, we replay them in our minds, our subconscious struggles with them, we dream about them, we have regrets and longings, as when Deborah Parker told me, “I don’t think I ever said goodbye to her. I didn’t say my usual ‘I love you.’ And that’s – that’s one thing our family does is when we are parting ways, we usually hug each other and say, *I love you*. And I still feel guilty that I didn’t tell her I love her that last time.” And of course the repetition is also a reflection of the trauma inherent in these specific stories. Many of the narrators have or have had PTSD.

This repetition, however, is a theatrical device that would not work in another format. Using it therefore allowed me to lean into the artifice that theater offers even as I stripped out video and props, but it required a greater focus on voice and juxtaposition. In so doing, I allowed the interview excerpts to dismantle the counterarguments of the pro-gun lobby without my having to explicitly state them.

It may turn out that a director or stage manager creates the effect of helicopters through sound and light, or the sun rising, or uses a hospital gurney, but the imagery is in the dialogue, and I wanted the perspective to also remain there. One example is from Kate Ranta's testimony: "And then they determined that they thought my injuries were grave enough that I needed be choppered out. So, the next thing I remember is being moved onto the gurney, and then being like, pushed over, like, a gravel – I was like, 'Where the hell am I going?' Um, they had to land at like the country club that was next door to my apartment complex. That was the closest place that they could land a chopper in. It's a busy area."<sup>8</sup>

Although it was watching *The Laramie Project* that reminded me of the power of verbatim theater, I knew and had read or seen Anna Deavere Smith's pioneering works from the early 1990s, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, and *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*. They and *The Laramie Project* remain pillars of the form, and with good reason: the interviews are deep and the thematic juxtaposition in the storytelling bring what otherwise might be disconnected voices into focus. Interestingly, though, all three plays are centered on one place and on one event, so much so that the writers of *The Laramie Project* have said that it wasn't until they realized that Laramie, Wyoming, was a *character* that they had a play.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Deavere Smith contextualizes her plays through identity that is wrapped up in community, from Crown Heights, Brooklyn (*Fires in the Mirror*) to Los Angeles (*Twilight*), so that no matter how disparate the points of view, the narrators share reference points in time and place that Deavere Smith then creates a narration around. That Deavere Smith is an actress that plays every role is another unifying technique she uses, as do the actors in *The Laramie Project*,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Kate Ranta, Session 2, Recording 2, @ 44:05 minutes.

<sup>9</sup> Tectonic Theater Group member and head writer, Leigh Fondakowski, in conversation with the audience of *The Laramie Project*, March 2018, Washington, D.C.



who were also the interviewers and writers for that play. Unlike Deavere Smith, Tectonic decided to be transparent about their interactions with the narrators by placing themselves in the narrative and describing what they were trying to do.<sup>10</sup>

*The Survivors* was difficult to imagine in all of these senses. The narrators, with one or two exceptions, do not know each other. The places and events and dates are distinct. Even the reasons behind the violence represent different issues, from domestic violence to crime. (Or, to be more precise, lax gun laws connect them, but how people acquire guns and the reasons they use them represent different issues.) And yet, like Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater, I began with a sense of place, and I hope the piece is stronger for it because beginning there helps to reveal the ubiquity of guns in America. It also pays homage to the life story interview and shows the ultimate displacement of survivors and what they have lost.

Nonfiction plays generally rely upon documentary source material, especially interviews, but also the written record—court transcripts, newspapers, journal entries, letters and songs. For example, the writers of *AYN RAND: Trauma Response*, produced by The Builders Association (2017), used Ayn Rand’s memoirs and letters, with the sound of a typewriter in the background as an actor reads them aloud. In Life Jacket Theatre Company’s *America is Hard to See* (2017), which explores the lives of convicted sex offenders, traditional hymns, original music, and even written scenes, are woven between the verbatim interviews. In *The Laramie Project*, the writer-actors also use their own journal entries. And both Tectonic and Anna Deavere Smith engage the media in their narratives, as the events in their plays made national and even international news.

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<sup>10</sup> I also indirectly learned about weaving oral history testimony to craft a narrative from authors Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain in their book, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. However, in “The Narrative Oral History Defined,” (p. 464), they state that in such a narrative, “the characters have to know each other, or at least know of each other,” and that, “it’s imperative that the lives of your cast of characters eventually collide.” This wasn’t true for me, or even possible, although, like the authors, I used thematic juxtaposition.

But according to one source, at least, works of purely verbatim theater are few and far between, because “constructing a play from the speech of people interviewed about a given topic presents a set of strict limitations on writers.”<sup>11</sup> Still, as I argued in my blog post on oral history and the theater, it is people who work in theater who have propelled oral history performance, rather than oral historians who have turned to the stage. Documentary theater directors also seem wary of the label, in part, it seems, because as storytellers they want to engage and entertain even as they teach. They also do not want to presume to be teachers.<sup>12</sup> (Interestingly for oral historians, verbatim theater developed after the invention of the portable cassette recorder.)

Still, “Ever since writer-performer Anna Deavere Smith’s landmark *Fires in the Mirror*, the stage has become not just hospitable to but hungry for documentary theater, often political in nature, and other work rooted in the real world.”<sup>13</sup>

Anna Deavere Smith wrote in her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*: “I was soon to learn about the power of rhythm and imagery to evoke the spirit of a character, of a play, or a time. I then started thinking that if I listened carefully to people’s words, and particularly to their rhythms, then I could use language to learn about my own time.”<sup>14</sup> In the same introduction, she considers doing so as an actress, and the language she uses reflects our own as oral historians when we discuss memory and embodiment: “Learning about the other by being the other

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<sup>11</sup> Amelia Parenteau, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Documentary Theatre?” *American Theatre*, September 2017. <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/08/22/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-documentary-theatre/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. See also, Werner-Thomas, “The Laramie Project, Documentary Theater & Oral History Performance,” <http://oralhistoryreview.org/current-events/the-laramie-project-documentary-theater-oral-history-performance/> and

<sup>13</sup> Laura Collins-Hughes, “The Narrative Appeal of Documentary Theater: Why journalists are turning to playwriting to express the ‘dramatic truth’ at the heart of their stories,” *Neiman Reports*, July 29, 2015. <https://nieman.harvard.edu/stories/the-narrative-appeal-of-documentary-theater/>

<sup>14</sup> Anna Deavere Smith, “Introduction,” *Fires in the Mirror*, Anchor Books, 1993, p. xxv.

requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of the body, mind, and heart, as well as the words.”<sup>15</sup>

This sounds a lot like oral history process, in particular when we discuss issues around embodied memory. With gun violence, there are of course injuries that we see and scars that we do not, both for people who have been shot and survived and for those who love them. This is why the total costs of gun violence are unknown. *Mother Jones* magazine has estimated “the true cost of gun violence” at \$229 billion annually, but only for those killed or injured.<sup>16</sup> The *truer* cost of gun violence would need to include people like Deborah Parker, who is not in any statistics related to gun violence, yet has PTSD and other health problems related to her daughter’s murder, and calls herself “highly medicated.” In other words, she registers in the healthcare system for the medical attention she receives, but not as gun violence related. She is also raising her granddaughter, who was nine months old when her mother was murdered.

“The dearth of analysis on the numbers, needs and realities of gun violence survivors has led to an information vacuum, hindering the development of effective policy, services and standards,”<sup>17</sup> according to Cate Buchanan, the Principal Investigator for the now defunct Gun Violence Project, supported by the Government of Norway. She also asks, what are the rights and needs of survivors of violence?

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. xxvii.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Follman, et al., “The True Cost of Gun Violence,” *Mother Jones* magazine, April 15, 2015. *Mother Jones* found that gun violence cost Americans \$229 billion every year in medical bills, law enforcement costs, and loss of income and productivity.

<sup>17</sup> Cate Buchanan, “The Health and Human Rights of Survivors of Gun Violence: Charting a Research and Policy Agenda.” *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 50–63.

3.

Synthesis of Findings:

What does it mean that few Americans, including gun owners, grow up thinking about the Second Amendment?<sup>18</sup> That African Americans don't consider it relevant to their lives at all? What better indicator of the racial divide in our country than the fact that the very people who are disproportionately affected by gun violence, African Americans,<sup>19</sup> are those who feel that gun *rights* don't apply to them? Furthermore, what does it mean that a black inner-city kid like Kareem Nelson has seen so many guns in his life he can't remember the first time he saw one, even though his mother would never allow one in the house? (Of course he does remember the first time he saw a friend killed with a gun. He was thirteen years old.) Or, on the other hand, that many of the white people I interviewed grew up with easy access to loaded guns, but their parents never discussed them in terms of either rights or responsibilities?

Before beginning my work in the OHMA program last fall, my approach to oral history was traditional and academic. While I still believe the traditional (academic) goals of oral history as I learned them – 1) to interview people to fill in a gap in the historical record, and 2) to deposit the interviews in an archive for future researchers – have much value, I have expanded my ideas about the possibilities of oral history practice many times over, not least through interpretation. And it has been in part in thinking about the myriad ways to interpret an oral history that I have come to understand what it means to listen deeply throughout the oral history process, and to search for metanarrative and layers of meaning. As oral historians, “our interviews...are far more

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<sup>18</sup> No doubt an increasing number do today because of the aggressive marketing and propaganda of the NRA and the weapons manufacturers who support it

<sup>19</sup> For example, in 2008-2009, black children and teens accounted for 45 percent of all child and teen gun deaths, but represent only 15 percent of the total child population. Report, “Protect Children, Not Guns,” The Children’s Defense Fund, 2012.

complex than we usually assume,” Ronald Grele writes. “If read properly, they do reveal to us hidden levels of discourse...not just facts [but] answers to questions which were never asked.”<sup>20</sup>

Answers to questions never asked is a profound way to read a text. In my interviews, I always ask about gun ownership and beliefs about the Second Amendment, yet I have never directly asked about individualism or freedom, values that underscore our supposed individual right to bear arms. These values are instead implicit in the interviews because they are in turn implicit in our laws and behaviors. It is the outcomes of those laws and behaviors – high gun ownership combined with lax policy equals dozens of shootings every day – that account for the grim reason behind the interviews in the first place. Yet regarding gun possession and use, these oral histories make clear that the value of freedom that some Americans hold so dear demands an equal share of individual responsibility with regard to lethal weaponry, and that that individual responsibility is sorely (criminally) lacking often enough – 100 people are killed every day – that we find ourselves in a public health crisis.

“When an incorrect reconstruction of history becomes popular belief, we are not called on only to rectify the facts but also to interrogate ourselves on how and why this commonsense took shape and on its meanings and uses,” writes Alessandro Portelli, who taught me to look for the metastructure in the storytelling to try to gain insight into historical consciousness, and to observe the myths that people create, why they create them, and what their creation tells us about the people who believe them.

“The mythic quality of these narratives and beliefs does not authorize us to ignore them,” he states. “They could not take such firm roots in popular imagination if they were merely an

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<sup>20</sup> Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*. Chicago: Precedent Pub., 1985, pp. 137-138.

ideological lie or a logical misconception. Myth, whether factually true or not, is always a response to a deep necessity.”<sup>21</sup>

As I wrote in the preface, the popular myth about “the good guy with a gun” resonates in American culture because of its deep roots in heroic figures we admire. Another popular myth concerns what has become a rightwing trope, blaming mental illness for gun violence, which Second Amendment defenders do, often after a mass shooting. But mental illness is a red herring. Statistically, those suffering from mental illness are far more likely to harm themselves than others. Suicide accounts for two-thirds of deaths by gunshot wound. Still, Chris Behner’s daughter, Julie, easily acquired handguns in three states with no background checks in spite of the fact that she had been diagnosed as bipolar and was suffering from depression. She shot and killed herself on May 9, 2012. She was 29 years old. As Chris Behner told me, “I would really have appreciated it if no one had sold my daughter a gun.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet with regard to mental illness and guns, more than suicide, even, is at stake, as two of my narrators make clear through their stories. In both cases, one could argue that if only dangerously mentally ill people were institutionalized or medicated, neither tragedy would have happened. While that may be true, it misses the point of human fallibility. And one needs to ask what other safeguards might have been put in place to prevent the murders.

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<sup>21</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, New York: Palgrave, 2003, p. 16. See also Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991. Furthermore, Luisa Passerini’s discussions about the intersubjective encounter have also been eye-opening. In her introduction to *Memory and Utopia*, for example, she states: “Historians have often paid special attention to forms of behavior imitative or learned (for example, in the relationship between lower and upper classes), instead of studying the interconnections between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and conditioning, the conscious and the subconscious, that are the source of individual and collective trajectories, and of strategies and practices of various kinds.” See Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity*. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 2. Passerini has much to offer in thinking about historical identity, and by extension about gun ownership in the U.S.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Chris Behner for MDA, May 22, 2013, @48:20 minutes. See also, <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>

Rachael Joseph's Aunt Shelley was murdered by a very distant relative with no criminal record, yet, "she had a long history of harassment," Rachael said. "We found out much, much later during the criminal trial that Susan had been banned from some really strange places, like the McDonald's on University Avenue in St Paul. She'd been banned from donating blood at the Red Cross. She was banned from the post office – just places where she had gone, maybe not heard what she wanted to hear from somebody working there, and then just caused a complete scene and started harassing and threatening whoever had made her angry on whatever particular day. She had never been dangerous. Just, you know, not mentally well." That was before she became homicidally angry at Shelley and bought a handgun for \$60 from a gun show without a background check.<sup>23</sup>

Betsy Dale Adams's brother, Patrick, was murdered in 1983 by a stranger, whom Betsy and her family had found out during the criminal trial *had* been institutionalized. He had also threatened to kill himself and "a whole lot of other people." The hospital knew this but released him anyway. His parents, who had him committed, kept a loaded rifle by their front door, with which he killed Patrick Dale.<sup>24</sup>

A background check could have saved Shelley's life, as well as Julie's. Liability insurance and mandatory safe storage may have saved Patrick Dale's. With insurance, at the very least, the murderer's parents would also have been held legally accountable, and perhaps they would have thought twice about keeping a loaded weapon where their mentally ill son could easily access it.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Rachael Joseph, Session 1, Recording 1, @ 42:20 minutes.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Betsy Dale Adams, Session 1, Recording 3, @ 46 seconds and 1:31 minutes. Also note the hypocrisy of the rightwing blaming mental illness while slashing funding for mental institutions. Patrick Dale's murderer was turned out of Bryce Hospital due to a lack of space in 1983. See Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, "Ronald Reagan's shameful legacy: Violence, the homeless, mental illness. As president and governor of California, the GOP icon led the worst policies on mental illness in generations," Salon, September 29, 2013. [https://www.salon.com/2013/09/29/ronald\\_reagans\\_shameful\\_legacy\\_violence\\_the\\_homeless\\_mental\\_illness/](https://www.salon.com/2013/09/29/ronald_reagans_shameful_legacy_violence_the_homeless_mental_illness/)

By extension, imagine that gun dealers were treated like bartenders and bar owners who are found liable if a patron crashes a car after leaving a bar if that person is obviously intoxicated to the point that they pose a danger to themselves or others. Yet the arms dealer who sold Shelley’s murderer a gun did not break the law, because not only is liability a non-issue for gun owners and sellers, background checks are not even required at gun shows in Minnesota.

Accountability, and the lack of it, is a theme that jumped out at me from the beginning of this project. This lack of accountability further traumatizes survivors and fuels their rage.<sup>25</sup>

The “good guy with a gun” fantasy and the stigma of mental illness, disparate as they seem, share a deeply American trait: the belief in individualism. In the case of gun violence, Second Amendment defenders view both the problem (mental illness) and the solution (a good guy with a gun) through that lens. Reformers in the gun violence prevention (GVP) movement, on the other hand, are seeking systemic remedies.

The sociologist James D. Wright sums up the individualist point of view when he writes: “Scholars and criminologists who speculate on the problem of guns, crime, and violence, would do well to look at things, at least occasionally, from the gun culture’s point of view. *Hardly any* of the millions of Americans who own guns have ever harmed anyone with their guns, and virtually none ever *intends* to. Nearly everything these families will ever do with their firearms is

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<sup>25</sup> The Second Amendment, both the modern interpretation of it as an individual right to own weapons and the defense of it as such that has dominated policy at every level since the 1980s, have in turn governed corporate and individual behavior. Consider: American gun companies manufactured 5.6 million firearms in 1980. Between 2008 and 2016, gunmakers produced or imported more than 75 million firearms for sale in the United States. During the same time period, permissive laws have allowed a lack of accountability to manifest, and not only through the most egregious examples, say, the ability to buy assault weapons and stockpile them and other arms and ammunition without a background check, but also in more subtle ways: a gun dealer need not keep records of arms sales, a gun store owner does not need to keep his shop secure even though a gun is stolen every two minutes in the U.S., and a parent does not need to keep her lethal weaponry stored safely. See Dave Gilson and Bryan Schatz, “A Brief History of America’s Massive Gun-Buying Spree: How the NRA and gun makers exploited politics and paranoia to sell millions of weapons.” *Mother Jones* magazine, May/June 2016. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/gun-industry-nra-assault-weapon-timeline/>



*largely* legal and innocuous. When, in the interests of fighting crime, we advocate restrictions on their rights to own guns, we are casting aspersions on their decency, as though we somehow hold them responsible for the crime and violence that plagues this nation. Is it any wonder that they object, often vociferously, to such slander?”

The qualifiers James D. Wright uses in his argument – *hardly any* gun owners harm anyone, *virtually none* ever intends to, their behavior is *largely* legal – are illuminating, as is his indignation, as if legal gun owners are the ones being victimized. They are also indicative of fervent cultural norms and speak to our sense of ourselves as a nation of upright citizens who are morally dutiful, who resent government interference, and who feel people have a right to protect themselves and their families, all deeply individualistic values. By focusing on their own (individual) freedom, however, Second Amendment defenders either ignore the self-determination, or will, of other people with guns, or attribute the death and destruction weapons cause to individual moral failings or mental illness. And the myth about individual mental or moral failings also extends to perceptions about crime, which themselves are largely based on (racial) fears that in turn propel both the legal and illegal gun trade.

In a Pew Research Center survey from 2016, 57 percent of respondents said that crime in the U.S. had worsened since 2008, even though FBI data show that violent and property crime rates declined by double-digit percentages during that span. Moreover, during this period 86 percent of white murder victims were killed by whites, while 94 percent of black murder victims were killed by blacks, a number that is only surprising if you believe that violence is mostly perpetrated by strangers.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>John Gramlich, “5 facts about crime in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, January 3, 2019. Michael Owens, “Crime Perception in Black and White,” October 30, 2017, Michael Owens, Artist for Freedom. <https://www.michaeloart.com/crime-perception-black-white/>

This focus on the individual therefore allows us to ignore structural issues including but not limited to poverty and social exclusion while weapons manufacturers rake in profits based on misguided fears. A final example of this focus: the white male shooters in white-on-white massacres are often called “lone wolves,” because the crime is seen as the act of a deranged individual, and not reflective of his race or religion. “Whiteness, somehow, protects men from being labeled terrorists.”<sup>27</sup>

The issues around gun ownership and gun violence go to the very heart of our socio-political identities and reveal how we want to live together – or not – as a society.

As a research subject, there are few areas that gun ownership and gun violence do not touch, from, in the humanities, women’s studies, whiteness and Critical Race Theory, (toxic) masculinity and pop culture, to health and human rights, areas that can be further subdivided into environmental justice, the built environment, disability studies, and healthcare access.<sup>28</sup> Other issues are political and economic and include the role of money in domestic politics and the role

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<sup>27</sup> Shaun King, The Intercept, “The White Privilege of the ‘Lone Wolf’ Shooter,” <https://theintercept.com/2017/10/02/lone-wolf-white-privilege-las-vegas-stephen-paddock/>. See also Errin Haines Whack, “Are white shooters called ‘lone wolves’ by default?” October 5, 2017. “The term is a convenient one for a society eager to ease its anxiety after such a horrific event, said Mark Hamm, a professor of criminology at Indiana State University and author of *Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*.” <https://www.foxnews.com/us/are-white-shooters-called-lone-wolves-by-default>, and Merrill Perlman, “The origins of the term ‘lone wolf,’” Columbia Journalism Review, October 31, 2017 [https://www.cjr.org/language\\_corner/the-origins-of-the-term-lone-wolf.php](https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/the-origins-of-the-term-lone-wolf.php)

<sup>28</sup> If disability, the term and the concept, describes the interaction with society and not the attributes of a person (see Cate Buchanan, “The Health and Human Rights of Survivors of Gun Violence: Charting a Research and Policy Agenda.” Health and Human Rights, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, p. 51), consider spinal cord injuries (SCI). SCI “caused by domestic gun violence now account for up to 17 percent of all spinal cord injuries, [and] survivors of gunshot injuries to the spinal cord are more likely to be young, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and unemployed. These factors contribute to significant challenges to recovery that these survivors will face.” The question then is how do SCI and paralysis – think of all the young minority men, in particular, in wheelchairs – increase their sense of social exclusion and oppression? See also, Scott Casey, MS, “Spinal Cord Injury,” Affirm Research, December 3, 2018. <https://affirmresearch.org/2018/12/03/spinal-cord-injury/>

of U.S. arms dealers in international violence. “The ready availability of guns in America is often seen as a domestic-policy matter, but it is also an international issue.”<sup>29</sup>

The people I have interviewed, the survivors, have given me insights that I had not expected and that undermine conventional narratives. My findings include first-hand testimony about some of the needs and realities of gun violence survivors, and show how those needs are not being met, including the sense of social abandonment, or lack of accountability, survivors feel, and how that compounds their trauma; they provide evidence that the so-called “good guy with a gun” is a deadly fantasy; that our laws are not only weak but are actually enabling; and that the Second Amendment is not nearly as relevant to people’s lives as the rhetoric would have us believe.

Oral history is a powerful tool for understanding these dynamics; but activist oral history has the explicit aim of social transformation at its heart. My sincere hope is that this project will continue to grow, so that we can not only understand the true costs of gun violence in American society but also find solutions that prevent such violence and address the needs of survivors today. Personal testimony can become part of the process of change.

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Blitzer, “The Link Between America’s Lax Gun Laws and the Violence That Fuels Immigration,” *The New Yorker*, March 18, 2018.

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# The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America - Blueprint



*The Columbia Center for Oral History Archives  
(CCOHA)*

Holly Werner-Thomas

Oral History Master of Arts Candidate

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# Project Description & Rationale

*The rationale for this project is twofold: Story Collection and Advocacy*

*Story Collection:* We don't often hear about the reality survivors of gun violence have to live with, from the original trauma of being shot or losing someone to gun violence to the mostly invisible aftermath of that trauma, including drawn-out legal battles, lost earnings, and lifelong medical and psychological complications. Gun violence survivors also experience the feeling of being left behind in a culture that simply moves on. This is true even after a mass killing when the media swoops in, only to leave again soon thereafter, but it is always true for private gun violence (domestic violence, crime, accidental shooting, or suicide) which accounts for 95 percent of all shootings across America. With at least 110,000 Americans shot on average every year – 37,000 of whom die, 80,000 of whom live – I wondered: Who are they and what are their stories?

*Advocacy:* This is an inherently political project that is rooted not only in the recent past but also in current events. According to Groundswell, “What distinguishes ‘activist oral history’ from most oral history work is its explicit aim of social transformation and its direct connection to or



active, intentional use by social movement actors to further their organizing efforts and campaigns.”

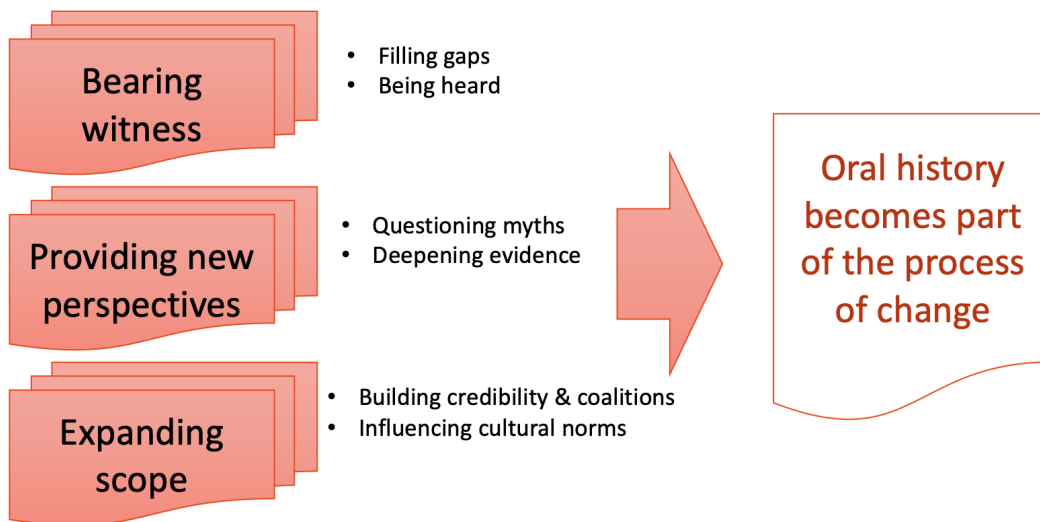
Gun violence is an issue that inspires me to action, and I hope to inspire others to do the same: To acknowledge that gun violence is a public health crisis, to show that U.S. gun laws are not only weak, but actually *enable* gun violence, and to demonstrate that survivors suffer from not only the original trauma of being shot and surviving or losing someone to gun violence, but also ethical loneliness, or what the human rights writer Jill Stauffer calls “the injustice of not being

heard.” This is the feeling of being abandoned by society and is experienced as another psychological and emotional blow to people who have endured violence.

Moreover, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has been banned from researching gun violence since 1996 after the NRA lobbied Congress that “none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the [CDC] may be used to advocate or promote gun control.” Oral history is an especially useful research tool in light of this fact.

*(See the Timeline in Appendix I at the bottom of this file for more on federal inaction.)*

## Influencing public discourse & policy through first-hand testimony



*This chart provides an overview of the oral history’s stages in relation to advocacy*

# Archiving Plan

The Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA) has agreed to accept “The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America,” into its collections, and will make this oral history one of its collecting areas in 2019.

As of December, 2018, I have submitted five of my eight interviews to be processed, including: MP3 audio files, transcripts, signed Legal Release Forms, biographical data forms, metadata (see Appendix II for an example), field notes for in-person interviews, and supplemental materials such as photos, self-published books, and other relevant media, as well as my Spring 2018 exhibit files for the three narrators I featured there (Kareem Nelson, Kate Ranta, and Deborah Parker). The supplemental exhibit files include the profile stories that I wrote and the audio pieces, which were six-to-eight-minutes each.

I have been working with Kimberly Springer, with whom I have an agreement to submit no fewer than thirty interviews for this project on an ongoing basis. (There will be room for this project to grow beyond thirty interviews, possibly including other oral historians, and I may end up conducting many more than thirty myself; this will largely depend upon funding.)

Kimberly Springer, MSI, PhD  
Curator, Center for Oral History Archives  
Rare Book & Manuscript Library  
Butler Library, Columbia University  
535 West 114th Street  
New York, NY 10027

# Methodology

## {Research Stages}

### *Methodology I. (Gathering Names)*

1. In September 2017, I used Facebook to put a general call out for gun violence survivors who would like to be interviewed for this project. I had previously worked in the gun violence prevention (GVP) community (I founded the Washington, D.C. chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (MDA), for which I created the original oral history project). I subsequently used previous contacts to reach out on Facebook, and was soon contacted by the Everytown Survivor Network.

2. The Everytown Survivor Network, is part of Everytown for Gun Safety (as is MDA today), and is a private group and page on Facebook that has an annual three-day conference. Director of Outreach, Chris Kocher, contacted me and then connected me with Cheryl Stumbo, of Seattle, a survivor in charge of the Facebook page. After posting my letter of invitation (in part) on their page, survivors who wanted to be interviewed contacted Cheryl, who forwarded me their email addresses.

3. Word of mouth

4. Lists where gun violence survivors show up (I am on an email list of people involved in the Gun Violence Prevention (GVP) community, and occasionally a petition circulates)

5. Gun Violence Archive: this is not a physical archive, but rather an online archive that was created in 2013; people working at this nonprofit collate and upload every single shooting and gun violence incident every day across the United States (as they are reported from 2,500 sources)

6. Through newspapers and other media, including a book of photography recently published by Kathy Shorr, *SHOT: 101 Survivors of Gun Violence in America* (2017), The Trace, an online news organization focused on guns, and databases from media outlets, such as the Chicago *Sun-Times*, which has an interactive map with information on every homicide in Chicago

7. May work with Daniel Bradfield at the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, Florida to combine our efforts regarding the Pulse Nightclub shooting

8. The annual survivor vigil, begun in December 2013

9. *I plan on expanding this oral history to include public health professionals, such as ER doctors, and shooting subcultures, especially hunters.*

## *Methodology II. (Mapping Project Stages)*

### Project Stage I

*The first stage of this oral history project is underway* and can be regarded as building the infrastructure for a potentially very large and ongoing oral history collection. It includes:

- ✓ gathering names
- ✓ making contact
- ✓ developing networks and relationships
- ✓ interviewing the first eight narrators and processing
- ✓ a thematic exhibit (OHMA, Spring 2018) and an academic presentation (OHA fall 2018)
- ✓ initial findings
- ✓ finding an archive: CCOHA
- ✓ submitting the first five interviews to the archive for processing

### Project Stage II

*The next stage of this project can be considered the buildout and begins January 2019.* It includes:

- ➡with the archive in place (CCOHA), interviewing 22 more narrators at a minimum
- ➡submitting the interviews for processing at the CCOHA on an ongoing basis
- ➡obtaining funding in order to travel to collect more interviews from across the U.S. and have them transcribed (Currently, I have narrators waiting to be interviewed in Atlanta, Seattle, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Cincinnati.)
- ➡This stage of the project might also include growth beyond what one interviewer can do by either 1) finding other oral historians to contribute, 2) partnering with local and state organizations such as Protect Minnesota, and issue-specific organizations, such as those on domestic violence, and/or, 3) teaching survivors how to interview each other while providing guidelines, stipulations, and oversight.
- ➡publishing findings
- ➡contacting the medical community to expand the oral history project
- ➡Advocacy: focusing on public-facing projects (see list, below)

# Public-Facing Project *ideas*

*My overall goal is to help reframe gun violence as a public safety issue*

- CCOHA @ Columbia University  
Kimberly Springer at CCOHA has decided to put “The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America” on its roster of collections she wants to see processed in 2019. While this project is just getting underway and processing won’t begin until next year, Kimberly and I have met and spoken about its potential in attracting other disciplines (anthropology and public health, for example), and about potential outreach in the form of symposiums, exhibits, etc.
- Everytown Survivor Network  
I have been working with the Everytown Survivor Network to help identify survivors who want to be interviewed. This network meets once a year not only for moral support, but also to provide instruction on how survivors can present their stories to the public, media, and politicians. I am hoping I can partner with them more formally so that they can use their oral histories (stories) to then zero in on the messaging they want to create.
- Public Service Announcements: with goal of cultural transformation  
Part of this messaging could be in the form of PSAs, so successful for Mothers Against Drug Driving (MADD) beginning in the early 1980s.
- Survivor Testimonials in Smart Gun Advertising  
The NRA and the gun lobby have squashed the possibility of selling smart gun technology, which already exists, and is estimated would reduce gun deaths by as much as 25 percent a year. It would be powerful to partner with the manufacturers of this technology to create an ad campaign with survivors who, for example, have been shot or lost family due to an accidental toddler shooting or suicide.
- Stumbling Stones  
This is perhaps far-fetched, and would need to happen on a local level. I visited Berlin a few years ago and noticed the stumbling stones (4x4 brass plaques) all over the city. They were created by a sculptor and are also sometimes called “mini memorials.” Instead of “Here lived Sofie Hoffmann. Born 1893. Deported 1942. Died in Auschwitz.” in front of someone’s residence, however, my idea is to create mini gravestones, e.g., “Here died Lindsay Key (1987-2006). Victim of a drive-by shooting.”
- Billboards & Radio/Podcasts  
Other ideas include a billboard campaign, especially near gun shows, that focus on one survivor, perhaps one quote, with the tagline, “The New Pro-Life Movement,” and story segments that could contribute to a podcast, for example, Love, Death & Money.
- A documentary play: I have begun to write a documentary play with the interviews.



# Budget

A note on the budget calculations: I have formulated these based on recommendations from OHMA alum (via email chains), which I have updated (May 2019) to reflect the OHMA conversation on freelancing.

Based on the 22 interviews I owe the CCOHA in 2019 (and possibly thereafter): here are some estimates for~

## The Interview Total

(Recommended \$1,000-\$1,500/interview)      \$1,000-\$1,500x22=\$22,000-\$33,000  
*(interviews are from 2 1/2-6 hrs)*

## OR By Separating Tasks—

The Interview      \$62/hour (based on \$500/day = \$125-370, or  
\$3,000-\$8,000)

## Transcribing

(Recommended \$100-\$150/hour)

This will vary:

At \$150/hr.x22 2-hour interviews = \$6,000 (this is  
the maximum amount/hour with the

minimum of  
versus \$125/hour x 3  
interviews = \$8,250

hours/recorded interview),  
hours/interview for 22

## Audit-Editing

\$500/interview x 22 interviews = \$11,000

## Metadata, Fieldwork & Forms

\$62/hr.x5 hrs = \$310/interview x 22 = \$6,820

## & Administration

*Contact through Follow-Up*

*Not including research, equipment, travel*

## Sample Travel Budget: Atlanta, Georgia

To conduct a minimum of 2 interviews over 2 days, afternoon and morning:

## Travel

Flight      \$250-350

Car rental	\$140 (2 days)
Airport Parking	\$20 (2 days)
Gas	TK
<u>Accommodations</u>	
AirBnB	\$150/night (1 night)
<u>Meals/Food</u>	
1 breakfast	\$10-15
2 lunch	\$10-15 x 2
2 dinner	\$20 x 2
Coffee	\$10 (\$80)
<u>Other</u>	
Phone/Internet	TK (=to come) (contd.)
Total	\$450

*There will be times that I have family and friends to stay with: Los Angeles, Minneapolis, etc. Still, the average 2-day trip, with cheap airfare (it can be inexpensive to Atlanta, at \$250, versus to L.A., at \$400 and up), and inexpensive accommodations, will be about \$400 for two-three nights. Other regional trips will be by car. Still, that is easily \$2,500 for only five 2-day trips to collect 10 interviews. Minimum \$5,000*

### Estimated totals to date:

My fee:	\$25-\$33,000
Travel:	\$5,000
Equipment:	TK

(I have my own professional audio equipment and mics; other expenses might include batteries, an external hard drive, etc.)

# Funding

As individual grants are difficult to obtain, I will be searching for partner institutions.



## Potential Funding Sources

### I. Oral history, general

1. The Columbia Oral History Alumni Association (COHAA)
2. OHA Emerging Crisis Grant (\$3,000)

### II. Academic

1. American Historical Association (AHA) Research Grant (\$1,500)
2. Schlesinger Library Research Travel Grants (\$3,000-specific to women)

### III. State-based (*the challenge is they are state-based, not national*)

1. DC Oral History Collaborative Partnership Grant (however, their focus might be more cheerful than gun violence: “DC’s life, history, and culture”)
2. Baylor Institute for Oral History (BUIOH) (however, Texas organization only and in the state of Texas may apply for a grant to facilitate oral history research in their communities)
3. Kentucky Oral History Commission (ditto)
4. Humanities New York (up to \$5,000 for Action Grants for public-facing humanities projects; however, organization needs to match 1-to-1)

### IV. Federal & University (*yet most of these seem unlikely*)

1. The U.S. Department of Justice (The Department of Justice offers funding opportunities to support law enforcement and public safety activities in state, local, and tribal jurisdictions; to assist victims of crime; to provide training and technical assistance; to conduct research; and to implement programs that improve the criminal, civil, and juvenile justice systems.)
2. The Joyce Foundation (committed to improving public policy)

3. The Ford Foundation (Human Rights focus; however, organizations only, and less than 1 percent of unsolicited grant applications are approved every year)
4. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, dedicated to healthy individuals and communities, already supports Evidence for Action, which created a new state arms database in 2017. The program is administered by the University of California, San Francisco. (unsure)
5. The Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University (I've heard this is possible, but only see faculty awards and grants on the website.)
6. Left Tilt Foundation, Oakland, funds social justice organizations
7. Open Society Fellowship
8. In late April, 2019, the House allotted \$50 to study gun violence via the NIH & CDC; *opportunity?*

Notes:

Both the Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation have no funding at this time for grant applicants. USC Shoah Foundation has several fellowships on offer, all related to genocide, and for PhD candidates only.

Amnesty International declared gun violence in the U.S. a human rights crisis in a report this fall (2018); perhaps there is a partnership opportunity?

Two universities (and states) announced new major initiatives in gun violence research this year: Rutgers University is serving as New Jersey's Center on Gun Violence Research. The center will be led by the Rutgers School of Public Health, within Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, and the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University–Newark. In California, the University of California, Davis has expanded its Violence Prevention Research Program (VPRP), and will serve as the home of the new University of California Firearm Violence Research Center (UCFC).

Corporate interest is increasing.

TOMS Shoes founder Blake Mycoskie created a \$5 million fund this fall to combat gun violence, and has partnered with seven well-known organizations, including Everytown.

# Appendix I

## **A Timeline: MAJOR FEDERAL (IN)ACTION on GUN LAWS, 1990-2018**

1993

Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act: Requires background checks on most firearm purchasers, depending on seller and venue. (Federally licensed firearms dealers have been required to run background checks on gun buyers since 1994, when the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act took effect. Almost all of these searches are done through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), a database launched by the FBI in 1998 as part of the Brady law. Most background checks on the NICS are conducted by the states, not federal agencies, but a 2016 audit by the Justice Department's inspector general found that in 630 of 631 selected cases from 2008 to 2014, states did not properly update the database or inform the FBI of the background check's outcome. (WAP0)

1994-2004

Federal Assault Weapons Ban: Banned semiautomatics that looked like assault weapons and large capacity ammunition feeding devices.

George W. Bush and the GOP Congress let the law expired in 2004.

1996

After aggressive NRA lobbying, a GOP Congress passed the Dickey Amendment, which mandated that “none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) may be used to advocate or promote gun control,” effectively banning federal research on a matter of public health. Jay Dickey, the Republican representative from Arkansas after whom the amendment was named, publicly renounced it in 2012.

2004

George W. Bush and the GOP Congress let the Federal Assault Weapons Ban from 1994 (the Brady Bill) expire.

2005

The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), which prevents firearms manufacturers and licensed dealers from being held liable for negligence when crimes have been committed with their products.

2008

In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, Chief Justice Antonin Scalia delivers a culture-altering opinion of the Court when he upholds an *individual's* right to bear arms.

# Appendix II

## **Sample Metadata File**

*Betsy Dale Adams Oral History Interview*

### **CREATED BY**

Holly Werner-Thomas/The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America

### **INTERVIEWED & RECORDED BY**

Holly Werner-Thomas, OHMA student, Columbia University

### **INTERVIEW OF**

Betsy Dale Adams, sister of Patrick (Pat) Dale, who was murdered in July 1983 near Evergreen, Alabama

### **NARRATOR BIOGRAPHY**

Betsy Dale Adams was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1957 and moved to small-town Alabama near the Gulf Coast by the time she was nine for her father's job with in the motor home business. She says she is "from Cincinnati," where she has deep family roots, but has lived in Alabama since she was nine, having moved there at a time of deep racial conflict (which she says remains largely the case today). Her mother died when she was nine, as well, and she grew up with her father, stepmother, twin sister, and two older brothers. Betsy has done many different things with her life, is currently a registered nurse, and is happily married to her second husband, also named Pat (Adams). She has two daughters from her first marriage who live in Charleston, South Carolina.

Pat Dale was two years older than Betsy, and was 27 years old when he was killed. He had been working as his father's "right-hand man" in the family-run truck manufacturing business, and was just emerging from the end of a painful relationship.

### **HOW NARRATOR FOUND AND SELECTED**

In September 2017, I used Facebook to put a general call out for gun violence survivors who would like to be interviewed for this project. (I had previously worked in the gun violence prevention (GVP) community, was the founding chapter head for the Washington, D.C. chapter of Moms Demand Action, for which I created the original oral history project. I subsequently used previous contacts to reach out on Facebook, and was soon contacted by the Everytown Survivor Network. The Everytown Survivor Network is a private group and page on Facebook. Director of Outreach, Chris Kocher, contacted me and then connected me with Cheryl Stumbo, of Seattle, a survivor in charge of the Facebook page. After posting my letter of invitation (in part) on their page, survivors contacted Cheryl, who forwarded me their email addresses.

Betsy Dale Adams was one of these. We first contacted each other in October, 2017. I sent her a letter of invitation. We emailed each other for several months before meeting on April 26, 2018

in Washington, D.C. Betsy was in town for a three-day organizational meeting with the Survivors Network.

### **INTERVIEW LOCATION**

Interviewer's home address: 3103 18<sup>th</sup> St., NW, Washington, D.C.

### **PLACES DEPICTED**

Cincinnati, Battle Creek, Michigan, and Gulf Coast and small town Alabama (in particular, Evergreen), as well as Gulf Coast, Florida, where Betsy lives in Gulf Breeze, and Pensacola Bay and Escambia Bay

### **INTERVIEW DATE**

April 26, 2018

<b>FORMS</b>	<b>Y/N</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
Legal Release	Y	
Biographical Data Form	Y	
Fieldnotes	Y	
Index	TK	= To come
Transcript	Y	
Approved by Narrator	Y	
Photo	Y	

A self-published book by Betsy, [Immunity from Justice: Pat's Story](#) (Mascott Books, Herndon, VA. 2014; *see below for comment.*)

### **DESCRIPTION/INTERVIEW SUMMARY**

This was a life history interview with Betsy Dale Adams. While my original intention was to interview only survivors of gun violence who had survived being shot themselves, a growing group of people whose loved ones have been killed (or committed suicide) with a gun call themselves survivors; several from the Everytown for Gun Safety Survivor Network (with which I have contact) wanted to be interviewed for this project, including Betsy, whose brother, Patrick Dale, was murdered in July 1983 by a stranger after offering him a ride home one Friday evening.

In the interview, Betsy talked about her family structure and the individuals in it. She was very close to her brother, Pat, and father (who has since died) and twin sister. She describes a tight-knit family running a family business and socializing at her parents' house (her father and stepmother's), where her father was often at the grill outside and the land was full of pecan and magnolia trees. She describes Pat as a good-hearted young man (he was 27 when he was killed) who was just getting over a relationship with a woman and finding his feet when he was out with old friends one night at a local hangout when he offered a stranger a ride home and was never seen alive again. The murderer, Douglas Griffin, had been released from a mental institution and had access to his parents' shotgun, which he used to shoot Pat.

Betsy describes the agony of the following week when Pat was missing (and then found), the trial(s), and subsequent harm Pat's murder has done to her family, especially her father. Betsy

also suffers from PTSD and is on an anti-depressant. She describes her political evolution and activism. She is a member of Everytown for Gun Safety's Survivor Network and Moms Demand Action, and says that when it comes to Pat's death and gun violence in general, "nothing's going to stop me from speaking out. I'll never stop."

### **TOPICS/KEYWORDS/TAGS & NAMES**

Betsy's family history (see place names), structure, and family members, Alabama culture and local life in the 1960s when she moved there as a child, including segregation; and in the early 1980s when her brother was murdered; and today; Betsy's brother's personal history; Douglas Griffin, the murderer, his background (he is mentally ill but had been released from a state institution), and the emotional and legal aftermath of Pat's murder, which is ongoing more than thirty years later, PTSD. Activism; gun reform; Everytown Action Network; Moms Demand Action.

### **COLLECTION TITLE**

**The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America**

### **FILE NAME, FORMAT, SIZE & TIME**

BetsyDaleAdams.1.WAV	2.15 GB	1:02 minutes
BetsyDaleAdams.2.WAV	2.15 GB	1:02 minutes
BetsyDaleAdams.2.WAV	1.83 GB	52:53 minutes
BetsyDaleAdams.1.MP3	74.5 MB	1:02 minutes
BetsyDaleAdams.2.MP3	74.5 MB	1:02 minutes
BetsyDaleAdams.3.MP3	63.5 KB	52:53 minutes

### **NOTES**

Betsy self-published a book about her brother, his murder, and the subsequent legal cases: [Immunity from Justice: Pat's Story](#) (Mascott Books, Herndon, VA. 2014) A copy will be deposited alongside the interview.



# Capstone Note

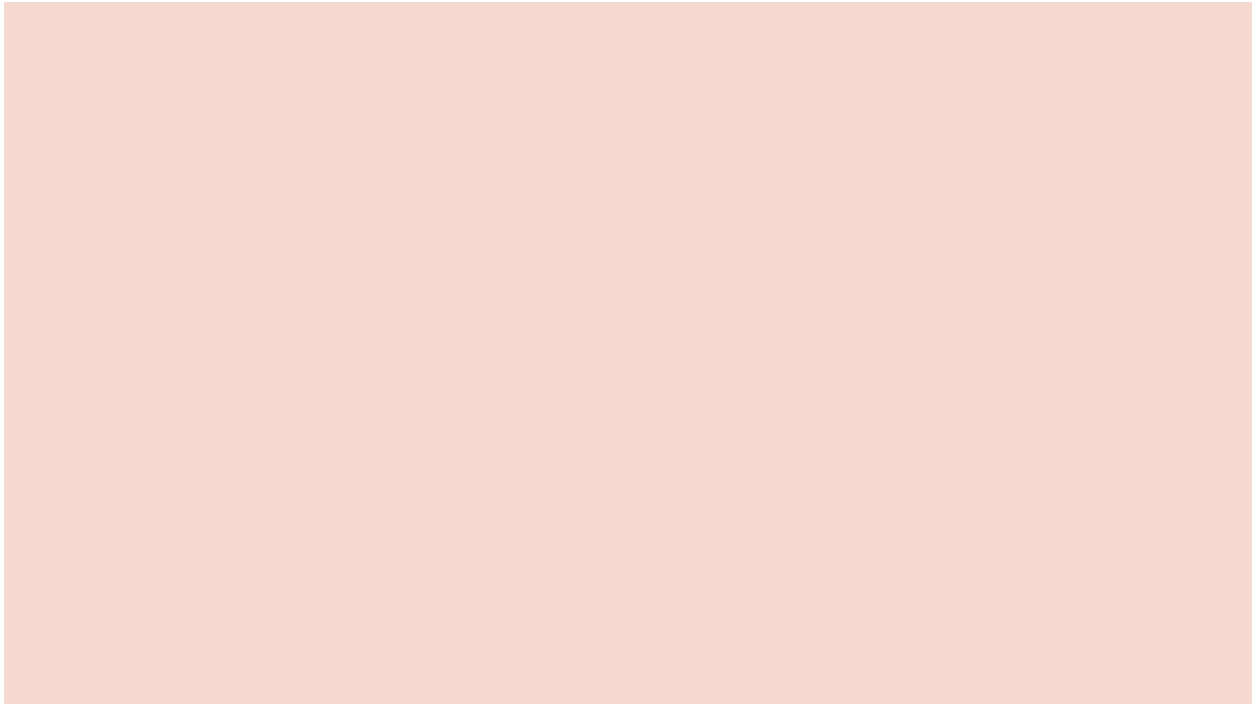
1. For my Capstone, I will submit a **Final Reflection**. This will include my preliminary research findings, which have expanded since the Spring exhibit and that I spoke about in my OHA presentation. I will make every effort to publish them. Among my findings thus far are:

- \* Abandonment (ethical loneliness, the topic of my exhibit)
- \* Mental and physical health issues are beyond even the \$229 billion calculated by Mother Jones magazine in 2015, for that number does not include family members who also suffer from PTSD, for example.
- \* Even people who grow up around guns do not discuss the Second Amendment
- \* Many victims of gun violence have never held a gun
- \* The laws are not only weak but actually enable gun violence
- \* The “good guy with a gun” theory is implausible

*The people I have interviewed, the survivors, have given me insights that I hadn't expected and that undermine the conventional narrative. This is important, because policies are often based on wrong narratives ~ on myths; in this case, the very American myths around personal responsibility are relevant. In 2012, there were 1.2 million violent crimes reported in the U.S., and fewer than three hundred instances of justifiable homicide, about the same numbers as many mass shootings per year, and far fewer than even accidental shootings, which account for between 1,600-2,000 shootings a year.*

2. Reframing gun violence as a public health and safety issue: My Capstone will include at least one **public-facing outcome**, listed above, with the ultimate goals of helping to influence the thinking and culture about guns, much like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

3. Finally, I also have two PowerPoint presentations to include, based on my work since last year: the first a summary of my April 2018 Exhibit, “**ABANDONED: Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence**,” as part of the OHMA program at Columbia, and the second, a copy of my presentation at the annual Oral History Association conference in October 2018 in Montreal, “**Influencing Public Discourse and Policy through Firsthand Testimony**.” As noted above, from my exhibit, I also have: the profiles that I wrote, and the audio stories that I created of the three survivors (Kareem Nelson, Kate Ranta, and Deborah Parker) that I highlighted in my exhibit. I will include these.

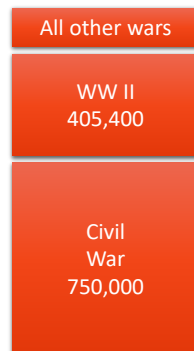


# ABANDONED

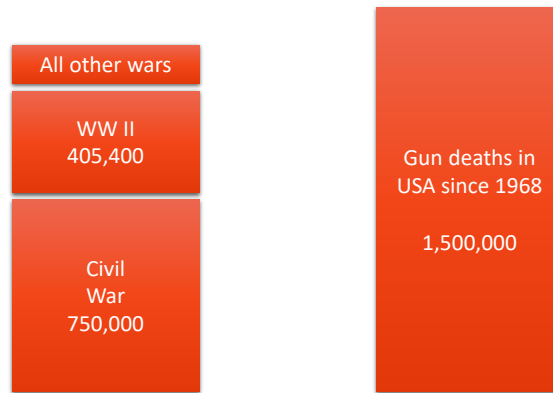
STORIES FROM SURVIVORS OF GUN VIOLENCE

August 29, 2018

At war with ourselves...



## At war with ourselves...



What distinguishes 'activist oral history' from most oral history work is its explicit aim of social transformation and its *direct connection to or active, intentional use by* social movement actors to further their organizing efforts and campaigns.

Groundswell

## Ethical Loneliness

# Ethical Loneliness

“The injustice of not being heard”

Jill Stauffer, Author and Human Rights Activist

## The Injustice of Not Being Heard

- Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA)
  - 2005: George W. Bush signs PLCAA
- Gives gun manufacturers broad immunity from liability
  - Gun violence survivors have no legal redress
- Federal law effectively silences gun violence survivors

Kate Ranta

"We just heard pop pop pop."



Betsy Dale Adams

"A body has been found."



## Deborah Parker

"The trial was excruciating."



## Kareem Nelson

"They called them 'phantom nightmares'."





LaShea Cretain

"I wake up in pain, 100 percent pain."



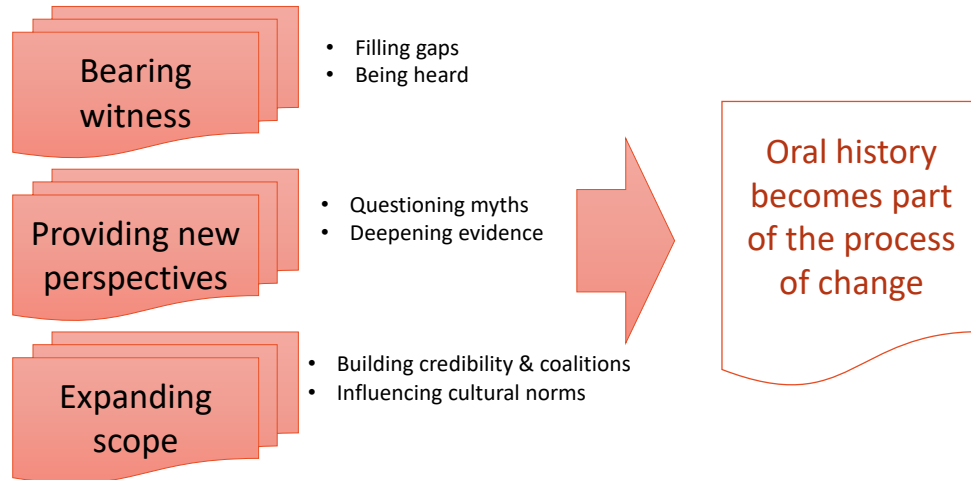
## Selected Findings

- Gun ownership
- Second Amendment
- The “good guy with a gun” theory
- Legal loopholes
- How laws enable gun violence



Influencing public discourse & policy through first-hand testimony

## Influencing public discourse & policy through first-hand testimony



Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.

Abraham Lincoln

“At its core, oral history is a ‘dialogic discourse’ that searches for connection between biography and history, between individual experience and societal transformation.”

Alessandro Portelli

### Exhibit Reflection & Oral History Project Findings

One of the biggest differences for me in learning more about conducting oral histories while at OHMA this year versus my previous training, where we largely considered oral history as primary source creation for an archive, to be used in the future, has been in thinking about what to do with the interviews even as we record them. This shift seems to be due in part to major technological changes, and in part to the creative focus at OHMA. At OHMA, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the purpose and production of oral history in terms of stories in sound (including radio, podcasting, and oral history documentary), and theater and performance. I have also had the opportunity to consider new forms and approaches to doing oral history, such as the collaborative, multi-viewpoint oral history biography. The ideas behind how to best convey stories in sound and potentially reach new audiences have been especially rich for me, and, as I wrote to Tomoko after her reflection on Nyssa Chow’s work, I have been really energized this year in learning about the possibilities of using sound in oral history projects - about the aural - what we hear - as much as the oral - what is spoken.

“Sound has emerged since the 1970s as a popular practice in experimental music, urban studies, cultural geography, sociology, oral history, and anthropology,” according to Steven High.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> High, Steven. “Embodied Ways of Listening: Oral History, Genocide, and the Audio Tour.” *Anthropologica* 55 (2013): 1-13.

While I have contributed to exhibits before, especially in my work at The History Factory where I conducted the historical research and created the storylines for them, it was still new for me to put one together myself, and one for which there was a major audio (aural/oral) component. I wanted to use audio to present more complete stories rather than what I felt interview clips alone could provide, and to do that, I needed to write a narrative, as well as to bring in sound effects and music, and my own narration. I was surprised to learn that it was my own narration that was the most difficult to produce. This was due to a combination of my imperfect diction, the cadence of my voice, which I found hard to modulate, especially in relation to its break in sound with the original audio, and the question of what I should say. I originally presented as a kind of news reader, but then decided to put myself in the story more personally, which worked much better (perhaps like Alessandro Portelli in “I Can Almost See the Lights of Home” where his process is transparent).<sup>31</sup>

At the exhibit, people really engaged with the audio stories that I created. And everyone who listened and talked to me afterwards about what they had heard used these words: important, powerful, professional, moving, upsetting; one woman said she was, “trying not to cry”. A major goal in producing an oral history on gun violence this year was to engage the public on a vital issue, and in the exhibit, I could see that goal come to fruition. This is an issue that inspires me to action, and I hope to inspire others to do the same: To acknowledge that gun violence is a public health crisis, to show that U.S. gun laws enable gun violence, and to demonstrate that survivors suffer from not only the original trauma of being shot and surviving or losing someone to gun violence, but also their ethical loneliness, or what the human rights writer Jill Stauffer calls “the

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<sup>31</sup> Hardy, Charles III and Alessandro Portelli. “I Can Almost See the Lights of Home: A Field Trip to Harlan County Kentucky.” *Journal of Multimedia History* 2 (1999).

injustice of not being heard”. In other words, I wanted to show both the damage gun violence is doing and how survivors feel abandoned in the wake of that gun violence, because when I first became involved in the gun violence prevention (GVP) community five-plus years ago, I noticed that, as far as I could tell, no one was collecting stories of survivors. This surprised me – and I saw a gap in the historical (and current) record to fill.

I also chose to interview gun violence survivors this year in part to push my own practice. I wanted to see how far I could go with an inherently political project that is rooted not only in the recent past but also in current events. Oral historians talk of meaning-making, a term borrowed from psychology. This is the process of how individuals make sense of their lives, including the events in their lives, their web of relations, and themselves. How do we make meaning in the aftermath of violence, however? Oral history can help us to make sense of what remains in a post-conflict situation, whether that conflict is societal or personal. As Mark Cave writes: “Crisis happens. A natural disaster or a mass shooting can destroy in an instant any community’s sense of well-being. Individuals will be left traumatized and in search of meaning. Oral historians have an important role to play in helping them make sense of what remains.”<sup>32</sup>

I agree with Sean Field, however, that oral historians should not cast themselves as healers.<sup>33</sup> I believe that if healing occurs, it is external to the reasons that I am there pushing play on the recorder. If it does, it’s something that we can feel gratified to be a part of, but that is not the same thing as having that goal at the outset. In my experience with gun violence survivors and people from New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast who fled Hurricane Katrina and did not have homes to return to, for example, healing was not what they were looking for from

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Cave, “Introduction: What Remains – Reflections on Crisis Oral History,” *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Field, Sean. “Beyond ‘Healing’: Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration.” *Oral History* 34, 1 (SEP)(2006): 31-42.

me, even if in talking to me they experienced some sense of relief or externalization of trauma or even that speaking is a form of political action.

In other words, spending time with people, listening to them, are significant acts in and of themselves: “The undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present, and, typically, an inability to envision a future.”<sup>34</sup> And, “...trauma survivors ...frequently bear the legacy of believing that they are the only individuals feeling this way and there is no choice but to endure in isolation.”<sup>35</sup> The act of bearing witness is not a cure-all, but by listening to the traumatic stories of people whose lives and worlds have been shattered by violence helps to reintegrate the survivor into human society.<sup>36</sup>

But I want to emphasize that I did not choose to focus on trauma for the sake of focusing on trauma. Gun violence is an urgent issue, and it is the sense of urgency arising from the fact that we are in a public health crisis that has motivated me. It is a public health issue that I believe we have greatly underestimated, at least until recently with the recent massacre in Parkland, Florida, and subsequent political action. This lack of focus – and understanding – is by design. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has been banned from researching gun violence since 1996 after the NRA lobbied Congress that “none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the [CDC] may be used to advocate or promote gun control.” (The Dickey Amendment was named after Republican Congressman Jay Dickey from Arkansas, who has said more recently that he regrets it.) Notably, during the exhibit, no one I spoke to knew that the CDC was banned from gun violence research.

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<sup>34</sup> Brison, Susan. 2002. “Chapter 4: Acts of Memory” in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>35</sup> Field, Sean. “Beyond ‘Healing’: Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration.” *Oral History* 34, 1 (2006): 31-42.

<sup>36</sup> Brison, Susan. 2002. “Chapter 4: Acts of Memory” in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press.

I explained some of my findings to exhibit goers, beginning with the idea of ethical loneliness or abandonment (the title of my exhibit) and the fact that survivors (defined as both people who have suffered nonfatal wounds and people who have lost loved ones to gun violence) feel left behind. Moreover, I explained that without gun violence research, their suffering – the PTSD of *family members* of gun violence victims, for example – doesn't officially register as part of the larger problem of gun violence, even when they are medicated for it.

What is the injustice of not being heard, then? Jill Stauffer claims it is the result of multiple lapses on the part of human beings and political institutions that, in failing to listen well to survivors, deny them redress by negating their testimony and thwarting their claims for justice. I asked exhibit goers to think of gun violence victims through this lens. Although not part of my exhibit, a case brought by the Sandy Hook Elementary School victims serves as a good example.

The families of nine Sandy Hook Elementary School victims who were killed and one teacher who survived filed a lawsuit in 2015 against Remington, the parent company of Bushmaster and manufacturer of the Bushmaster rifle, which the killer used along with a Glock pistol to massacre 26 people, and wound two others, in December 2012. In filing suit, the Sandy Hook families argued that Remington knowingly marketed a military weapon – the AR-15 – to civilians, but the lawsuit was dismissed in 2016 under a 2005 federal law ruling that gave gun manufacturers broad immunity from liability. The law is known as the PLCAA, or the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which prevents firearms manufacturers and licensed dealers from being held liable for negligence when crimes have been committed with their products. (Exhibit goers could read about the PLCAA on one of my banners.)

Chris W. Cox, the NRA's chief lobbyist, said about the law's passage in 2005: "What we witness today is the culmination of a seven-year effort that included a comprehensive legislative



and election strategy.” This means that the NRA and the weapons makers it represents had been working since 1998 – a year *before* the Columbine High School massacre – toward ensuring that they could not be held legally accountable for the injuries and deaths their products inflict on people in our country. Cox also said: “We worked hard to change the political landscape to pass this landmark legislation.” Wayne LaPierre, the NRA’s executive vice president, then thanked President Bush for signing what he called “the most significant piece of pro-gun legislation in twenty years” into law.

They were right: Because of the PLCAA, the firearms industry has zero incentive to practice responsible marketing, distribution, or manufacturing. They have seen to it that victims and survivors will never have their day in court. In the case of the Sandy Hook families, the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act has effectively silenced these survivors of mass violence. This silencing is the result of multiple lapses on the part of human beings and political institutions that, in failing to listen well to survivors, deny them redress by negating their testimony and thwarting their claims for justice. *This is the injustice of not being heard.*

And without the mandatory liability insurance required of every other dangerous object in our society, from motor vehicles to heavy industrial equipment, victims and survivors have even less recourse. Yet 110,000 Americans are shot on average every year, the vast majority of them – 95 percent – not in public mass killings but in private situations – through domestic violence, crime, accidental shootings, or suicide. Who are they, I asked, and what are their stories?

At the exhibit, I presented only three: Kareem Nelson, Kate Ranta, Deborah Parker (and by extension, Lindsay Key, her daughter who was murdered). Three different stories from three survivors of gun violence whose only connection is the easy access to guns that has shattered all of their lives.

I then asked exhibit goers to consider what these survivors have endured as they listened to the audio: the trauma of being shot compounded by the mostly invisible aftermath of that violence that contributes to their feelings of injustice. For example, the drawn-out trials, like Kate Ranta's domestic violence criminal court case that she and her family had to bear for five years and through one mistrial (the length and unknowingness of which she described as "torture"), or Deborah Parker's criminal court case that did not even begin until six years after her daughter, Lindsay Key, was killed in a drive-by shooting because the murder was gang related and witnesses were too afraid to speak; the psychological complications that follow the physical trauma: the severe PTSD Kareem suffered following his attack and the fact that he was on suicide watch for six months, or the fact that Deborah, who describes herself as "highly medicated" since her daughter's murder, hasn't slept in the eleven years since; the medical bills that come as a shock, including after a loved one's death; the random access to support from everyone from the medical establishment to funeral homes, which some survivors credit with saving their lives while others say is negligible to cruel; the opportunity cost of being disabled and unable to work (after he was shot and became paraplegic, Kareem received only \$538 a month to live on, yet his job prospects were less than what they had been before); and, finally, the unwillingness of our society – perhaps until now – to listen. (To further stay with Deborah Parker's story, which I explained in person during the exhibit, she is not in any statistics related to gun violence, but has PTSD and other health problems related to her daughter's murder, and, as I stated above, is highly medicated, so she registers in the healthcare system as the latter but without official cause. She is also raising her granddaughter, who was nine months old when her mother was murdered.)

While my main motivation has been the urgency of the gun violence public health crisis, and my belief that the oral histories help to fill in an important gap in our understanding of the toll gun violence takes on us, within the realm of oral history, I was also interested in and inspired by activist oral history.

According to Groundswell, “What distinguishes ‘activist oral history’ from most oral history work is its explicit aim of social transformation and its *direct connection to or active, intentional use by* social movement actors to further their organizing efforts and campaigns.”

Not least for me is The ACT UP Oral History Project, because I remember the beginning of the AIDS crisis well, and have always been inspired by the activism of ACT UP. The oral history – “a collection of interviews with surviving members of the AIDS coalition, men and women of all races and classes who have reformed entrenched cultural ideas about homosexuality, sexuality, illness, health care, and the rights of patients” – records not only the movement, which is important enough, but also the web of issues that interconnect with it, from sexuality to healthcare, a vital contribution.

The Voice of Witness series also continues to contribute valuable, normally unheard, stories both domestic and international. Among my favorite VOW books is *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing*, because, as ever with oral history, of the unvarnished nature of the stories, but also because the story of public housing in Chicago and St. Louis and elsewhere is important to understand, and the narrators in this book brought me closer to that understanding just by describing their experiences.

Both The ACT UP Oral History Project and VOW’s *High Rise Stories* concern the recent past, however, more than current events (this is debatable, but *mostly* true in that the people in them describe their lived experiences of a certain time and place already past). Oral history in

these projects is used to record that recent past and its aftermath, but not as an organizing tool, which Daniel Kerr notably did in mobilizing in Cleveland around homelessness in the 1990s, an oral history project for which he took the ideals behind a shared authority to heart.<sup>37</sup>

Where does my oral history of gun violence survivors sit within the space of activist oral history? It's true that while I am collecting stories from people who describe their lived experiences of a certain time and place, it's not true that those lived experiences are *past*. This is part of the point of collecting their stories: the aftermath is ongoing and permanent. Moreover, it is not clear yet where the project is going. It certainly isn't finished.

Since last fall, I have spoken several times to Sandy and Lonnie Phillips who are in talks with USC/The Shoah Foundation, and have indicated that they want me on their team. With that promise in front of me and no other outside archive interested thus far, I have waited for more progress even as I have continued to interview survivors (I have collected seven out of eight oral histories so far, and plan to continue at least until I graduate next spring). The Phillips have asked me for my interview questions, which I have provided, but it has been difficult to pin them down on any project specifics, although Sandy is putting me in touch with more survivors. Therefore, while I remain hopeful, I am not counting on the work with the Phillips to come through. However, Kimberly Springer, the curator at CCOHA, sent me an email a week after the exhibit inviting me to submit my collection there. She wrote: "I'm wondering if you'd be open to discussing submitting your collection to Columbia's Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA). Depending on how many interviews you have or plans you have for future directions for the project, the perspectives of this important occupational group would be most welcome for

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<sup>37</sup> "We Know What the Problem Is": Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom up<sup>SEP</sup> Author(s): Daniel Kerr<sup>SEP</sup> Source: The Oral History Review, Vol. 30, No. 1, (Winter - Spring, 2003), pp. 27-45.

researchers and students. Gun violence is one of my collecting areas for CCOHA and I'd like to hear about your preservation and access plans." I have followed up with her and we are planning on meeting at some point in the near future.

I also remain focused on the idea that if I walk away from this project after I graduate, I leave something public facing and accessible behind. This might be a Website, although there are issues of marketing, bandwidth, and storage that might prove to be prohibitive. Another idea is a public art/billboard campaign, or a radio segment for PRX, or to pitch a story to an existing show, such as *Death, Sex & Money*. Or I might mimic Alisa Del Tufo's policy and legislative efforts with regard to domestic violence survivors wherein she created a set of policy changes for and in front of politicians alongside the survivors she interviewed. I also hope to generate more interest in my focus on gun violence in the oral history community via the Oral History Association conference in Montreal this fall, where I will be presenting my findings. My exhibit was one step in that direction.

And during my exhibit, I was gratified to engage with a public audience deeply on an issue I am passionate about – and to contribute something substantive to the discussion. I had hoped, however, that people would use the props that I provided, especially to sit in the wheelchair under Kareem's banner, or the white plastic café chair near Lindsay and Deborah's photo. As far as I saw, no one did, and this was probably due to my not including instructions in the audio combined with my inability to explain to everyone before they pushed play that this was an option. (Several people did use the information page I provided on how to listen to/engage with the audio, but I still saw no one sitting down.) Another reason is that exhibit goers may have felt too shy to do so. For that reason, I imagine, no one (again, as far as I saw) read the partial transcripts out loud. I'm still glad that I provided the opportunities to do so,

however. But I learned that people will engage with your material in the ways that they choose to, regardless of your prompts. As the overall room was crowded, noisy, and full of other great projects, I was somewhat surprised and grateful when people spent as much time as they did at my exhibit. I liked using the cocktail table for its height, but it was too small to fit everything I wanted, and effectively kept people on the move rather than further engaged with the materials there. This is perhaps why no one used the playing cards or blank book that I provided to consider the statistics and questions I had written there and respond to them.

Having said that, all of the written profiles were taken, and several people wrote postcards to send to their representatives. And most importantly, exhibit goers engaged with this issue and with me, which was very rewarding.

OHA PRESENTATION DRAFT OUTLINE (20 minutes with graphics and audio)

- Very brief background on the issue of gun violence with statistics (and the dearth of research and its consequences)
- Brief background regarding my engagement with the issue
- Explanation of the oral history project & its evolution
- Findings: Trauma, plus the idea of ethical loneliness/abandonment
- Findings: Audio clips from narrators telling the story of their trauma and subsequent abandonment (w/photos of people)
- Continued Work and Research: Places and areas for expansion for this (and other?) projects

*Another possibility is for me to invite survivors, although they would need to pay their own way.*

DIGITAL PORTFOLIO FROM THE EXHIBIT, APRIL 2018:

# ABANDONED

STORIES FROM SURVIVORS OF GUN VIOLENCE  
An Exhibit



**METANARRATIVE:** Voice vs. Silence

**NARRATIVE:** In my exhibit, I wanted to show both the damage gun violence is doing (the original trauma of being shot or losing someone to gun violence), and how survivors feel abandoned in the wake of that gun violence, what human rights activist Jill Stauffer calls, “ethical loneliness.”

I envisioned the exhibit space with four panels (two sets of two V-flats) and one table in front of them for materials. The information on the V-flats told the (partial) stories of three narrators: **Kareem Nelson**, **Kate Ranta**, and **Deborah Parker**. I used a photograph of each person, a quote from each interview, and illuminated the bigger issues surrounding each one with 1-3 statistics—all of this against the metanarrative of Voice vs. Silence.

I used three props – a wheelchair in front of Kareem’s banner; a carpet sample in front of Kate’s; and a plastic lawn chair in front of Deborah’s, to invite exhibit-goers to embody the experiences of both those who have survived being shot (Kareem and Kate), and those who did not (Deborah’s daughter, Lindsay, who was sitting in a similar chair when she was killed.) For each person, I created a five-minute audio story and wrote a profile.

I included two other banners: an introductory banner that filled the entire length of the 4x8-foot panel, and a supplemental informational banner with “thoughts and prayers” Tweets from Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, the Congressional politician who has received more money from the NRA than any other, and other statistics.

*See the banners on the next five slides.*

On the table were the profile story take-aways, postcards with suggestions about what to write to your representative, “playing cards” with additional statistics and questions, a book to leave your email address for me to follow up, and the three audio players.



## Introductory Panel

In the U.S., we don't often hear about the reality survivors of gun violence have to live with, from the drawn-out legal battles they endure, to their lifelong medical and psychological complications, including disabilities that include the inability to work, and a lifetime of lost earnings. There are also emergency hospital and ongoing healthcare bills to be paid. And there is the feeling of being left behind in a culture that simply moves on. This is true even after a mass killing when the media swoops in, only to leave again soon thereafter, but it is always true for private gun violence (domestic violence, crime, accidental shooting, or suicide) which accounts for 95 percent of all shootings across America.

Yet ethical loneliness, or the feeling of being abandoned by society, is another psychological and emotional blow to people who have endured violence.

110,000 Americans are shot on average every year.  
Between 30,000-40,000 die. Another 80,000 live.  
Who are they and what are their stories?



First Narrator, Kareem Nelson  
Baltimore, Maryland

Quote: “And the next thing I knew, I heard the helicopters, and I heard the ambulance, and they told me I was paralyzed. ‘How do you know I’m paralyzed?’ And he’s like, ‘I know you’re paralyzed.’ I said, ‘How do you know?’ He said, ‘You just didn’t feel me touching your feet. I’m touching your feet. You feel that?’ I’m like, ‘Nah.’

Statistics:

- Gunshot wounds are a primary cause of spinal cord injury (SPI).
- Tens of thousands of guns stream into Baltimore every year from Virginia, which ranks #1 in illegal trafficking, and home of the NRA.
- Handguns are the weapons most likely to kill you, but Americans associate them with self-defense.
- Roughly half of the thirty people killed every day by firearms are young black men.



Second Narrator, Kate Ranta  
Coral Springs, Florida

Quote: “Everything happened really, really fast. So my Dad came in, and my ex had already gotten to the door and was starting to push in to come in, and both of us were on the other side pushing against the door to, you know, keep him out. And then all of a sudden, three bullets came through –We just heard pop, pop, pop. So we didn’t know there was a gun, first of all. I thought he was just pushing in to, like, force his way in to talk. We didn’t see a gun until we heard the shots.”

Statistic: More than half of the women murdered by men in the U.S. are killed by intimate partners, and more than half of those are murdered with a gun.

Fact: In Florida, you need to be convicted to be put in the background check system and therefore prevented from buying a gun. With the restraining order, the state seized Kate Ranta’s ex-husband’s guns, but he could buy more the next day.



Third Narrator, Deborah Parker  
*The mother of Lindsay Key*  
Chandler, Arizona

*With statistics and facts from Florida*

Quote: "About 11o'clock that night, I sent her a text. As the evening progressed, my messages became more concerned and more frantic. Well, the sun was barely coming up and I remember it was just peaking through the windows a little bit, and there was a hard pound at the front door. I got up quickly, but when I got to the door, I stopped about two feet from it and I had trouble breathing. So I just took a deep breath and I slowly walked to the door and I gradually opened it. And there were two men standing there. One of them began to speak, and he asked me, 'Are you Lindsay Key's Mom?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'There was a shooting at the party Lindsay was at. Lindsay was shot. I'm sorry to tell you this, but Lindsay did not survive her injuries.' And I still can't believe somebody said those words to me. I still, eleven years later, can't believe Lindsay was killed. At that moment, a primal scream left my mouth that I didn't even know I could make. And I yelled, 'Lindsay's dead!'"



### Final Banner: Supplemental Information

"Thoughts and prayers" from Arizona GOP Senator John McCain with prayer balloons

### Major Federal Gun Legislation, 2000-2018

2004: George W. Bush and the GOP Congress let the Federal Assault Weapons Ban from 1994 expire.

2005: A GOP Congress passes the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, effectively banning any legal recourse for people who wish to sue firearms manufacturers and licensed dealers for negligence when crimes have been committed with their products. The families of nine Sandy Hook Elementary School victims who were killed and one teacher who survived filed a lawsuit in 2015, arguing that Remington, the parent company of the manufacturer, Bushmaster, knowingly marketed a military weapon to civilians. The lawsuit was dismissed in 2016 under the PLCAA.

2008: In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, Chief Justice Antonin Scalia delivers a culture-altering opinion of the Court when he upholds an individual's right to bear arms. This is a new and controversial opinion.

I provided two postcards for exhibit-goers to write to their representatives. I also offered to send them. I watched several people fill them out, and others take a few. (No one asked me to send them, but they sometimes asked for suggestions of what to say.)

I also provided two laminated Suggestion Pages:

Ask Your Representative & Write Your Representative (with suggestions of what to say)

*The postcards and Suggestion Pages are on the following four slides.*



What's the process of buying a gun in the U.S.?

1. Pass instant background check. 2. Buy gun.

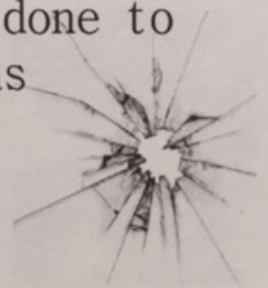
What's the process of buying a gun in Japan?

1. Join shooting club. 2. Take firearm class. 3. Prove mental fitness. 4. Apply for permit to take training. 5. Describe why you need a gun. 6. Pass review of criminal history. 7. Apply for gunpowder permit. 8. Pass firing test. 9. Describe gun you want. 10. Buy gun safe. 11. Let police inspect storage. 12. Pass another background check. 13. Buy gun.



“In a typical handgun injury, a bullet leaves a laceration through an organ such as the liver. The organ of one of the mass-shooting victims from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, looked like an overripe melon smashed by a sledgehammer, and was bleeding extensively. Nothing could be done to fix the problem. The injury was fatal.”

~A trauma center radiologist



ASK YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

What are YOU doing to ~

- ~Ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines?
- ~Enable the CDC to research gun violence as a public health issue?
- ~Require background checks for all gun sales?
- ~Support local violence prevention and intervention programs?
- ~Disarm all domestic abusers?
- ~Make extreme risk protection orders available in your state?

AND ASK YOURSELVES

What are YOU doing to ~

- ~Ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines?
- ~Enable the CDC to research gun violence as a public health issue?
- ~Require background checks for all gun sales?
- ~Support local violence prevention and intervention programs?
- ~Disarm all domestic abusers?
- ~Make extreme risk protection orders available in your state?

- Do you vote? Who do you vote for, and what is their voting record regarding gun legislation?
- Do you call your representatives to demand these six ways to reduce gun violence?
- Do you volunteer for any groups supporting these initiatives, from Moms Demand Action and Everytown, to Project Longevity and the Alliance for Gun Responsibility?

What else can you do?

- Boycott businesses like FedEx and Amazon that are in bed with weapons makers.
- Dedicate some time to working on campaign finance reform and help to overturn Citizens United to help reduce the \$\$ in politics undermining our democracy.
- Lobby lawmakers: mandatory gun liability insurance would greatly reduce gun violence.

**\*Write Your Representative\***  
***If YOU write the postcard, I will mail it***  
*(Also feel free to take a postcard to send from home)*

**EXAMPLES**

**Peter King**, (R-South Shore, Long Island), New York's 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district  
*You voted Yes to prohibit New Yorkers from suing gun makers & sellers for gun misuse.  
You voted Yes on decreasing the waiting period to purchase a gun from ONLY 3 days to 1 DAY!  
Isn't it time you received an F from the NRA and an A+ from average citizens like us?*

**John Faso**, (R-Kinderhook), New York's 19<sup>th</sup> congressional district  
*You'd think that \$7,950 wouldn't be enough to buy a politician. Yet that's what the NRA donated to you.  
Is that why you were opposed to New York's SAFE Act?*

**\*Choose Your Message\***

*~Enough is Enough!*

- 1. There is nothing elitist about wanting to be safe*
- 2. Gun violence is a public health crisis that costs the U.S. nearly \$230 billion every year.*
- 3. The Protection in Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA) gives weapons makers unprecedented immunity from liability enjoyed by no other industry in America:  
Please help overturn the PLCAA*

**\*OR ASK: What are YOU doing to ~\***

*~Ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines?*

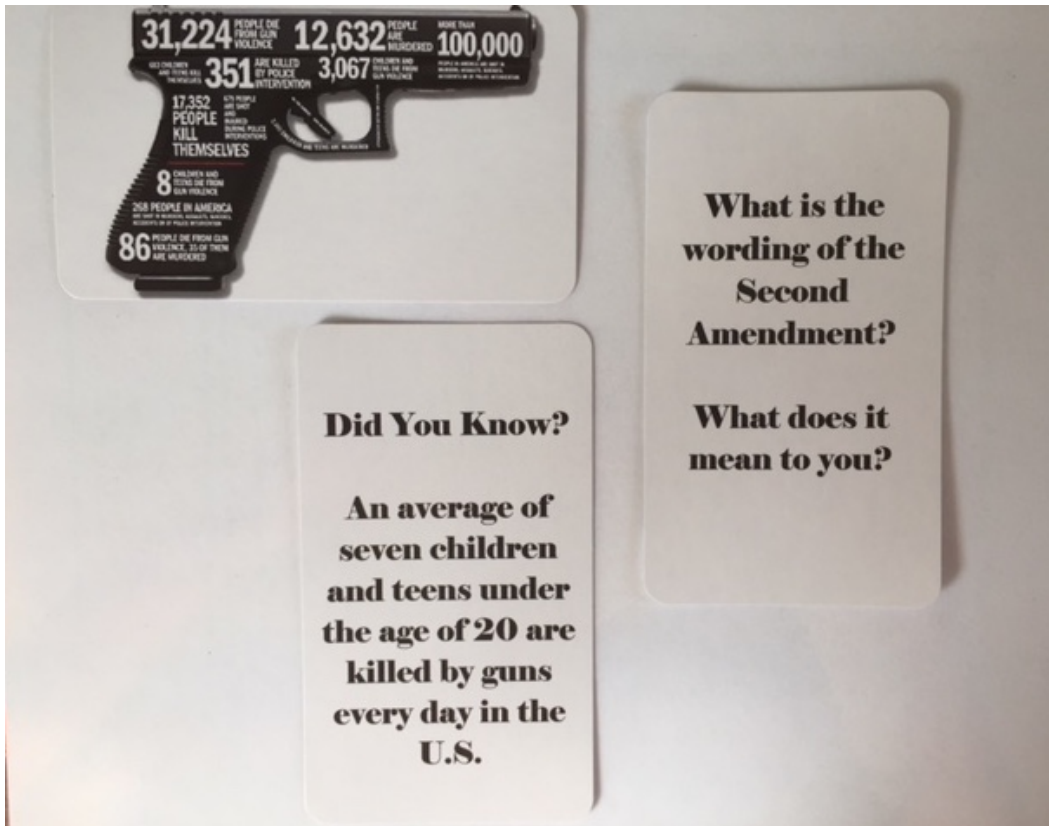
*~Enable the CDC to research gun violence as a public health issue?*

*~Require background checks for all gun sales?*

*~Support local violence prevention and intervention programs?*

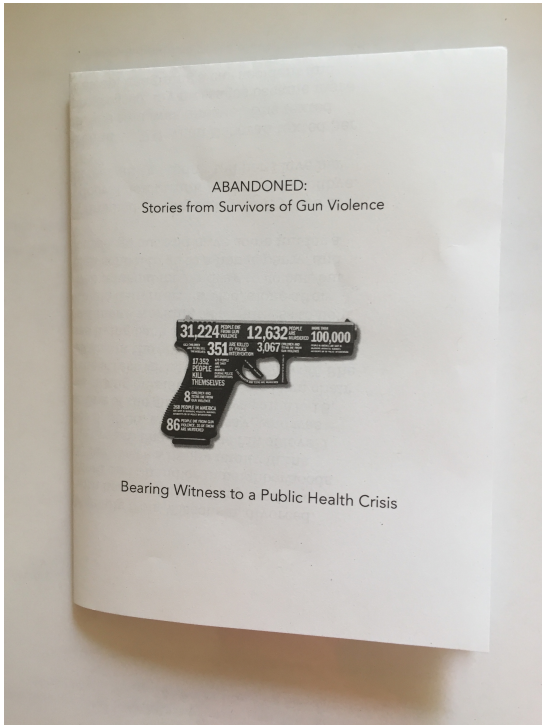
*~Disarm all domestic abusers?*

*~Make extreme risk protection orders available in your state?*



I created a set of 25 “playing cards” with additional questions and statistics.

I wrote three profiles as “take aways” for exhibit-goers of the three gun violence survivors featured in the exhibit. For each, I wrote the profile, and created a quarter-fold passport-shaped handout, using the same front and back covers, and the same inside left cover for each.



Front cover

To learn more about **ABANDONED:  
Stories from Survivors of Gun  
Violence**, or if you or someone you  
know has been affected by gun  
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in this project, please contact the  
project director and oral historian,  
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Library in Butler Library and is open  
to all.

*\* All interviews & copy by  
Holly Werner-Thomas.  
Cover image courtesy of Time.*

Back cover



110,000 Americans are shot on average every year. Between 30,000 and 40,000 die. Another 80,000 live. Yet we don't often hear about the lived realities of gunshot victims who survive or the people left behind when gunshot victims don't survive: from drawn-out trials, to medical and psychological complications, to the inability to work, and medical bills. Here is one survivor's story.



Name: Lindsay Demoro Key  
Date of birth: May 26, 1987  
From: West Palm Beach, Florida

The oldest of three children, Lindsay Key was born in Florida in 1987 but grew up in the Phoenix, Arizona area after her parents, Gregory Key, a former minor league baseball player and West Palm Beach, Florida homicide detective, (contd.)

Inside  
(All profiles  
continue on  
inside page.)

A profile page that is ready to print.

Bearing Witness to a Public Health Crisis



Stores from Survivors of Gun Violence  
ABANDONED.

110,000 Americans are shot on average every year. Between 30,000 and 40,000 die. Another 80,000 live. Yet we don't often hear about the lived realities of gunshot victims who survive or the people left behind when gunshot victims don't survive: from drawn-out trials, to medical and psychological complications, to the inability to work, and medical bills. Here is one survivor's story.

*\* All interviews & copy by Holly Werner-Thomas. Cover image courtesy of Time.*

To learn more about **ABANDONED: Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence**, or if you or someone you know has been affected by gun violence and would like to participate in this project, please contact the project director and oral historian, Holly Werner-Thomas, at [hw2627@columbia.edu](mailto:hw2627@columbia.edu). To listen to the full audio of this interview, please visit the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (COHA) at Columbia University, which is located in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library in Butler Library and is open to all.



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The oldest of three children, Lindsay Key was born in Florida in 1987 but grew up in the Phoenix, Arizona area after her parents, Gregory Key, a former minor league baseball player and West Palm Beach, Florida homicide detective, (contd.)

**ABANDONED: Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence**

*Presented here are three very different stories from three survivors of gun violence whose only connection is the easy access to guns that has shattered all of their lives -*

*Warning: The content may be difficult to listen to and is not suitable for children.*

**\*Ways to Walk through the Exhibit\***

- 1) Listen to each audio segment as you walk through the exhibit.
- 2) Listen to the audio as you sit on the props provided.
- 3) Turn off the audio and read the partial transcripts aloud.

**\*The Audio\***

- 1) Kareem Nelson, 6 minutes
- 2) Kate Ranta, 6 minutes
- 3) Deborah Parker/Lindsay Key, 8:39 minutes
- 4) John Cage, 4'33" (What do you hear? Imagine Congressional Moments of Silence after every mass shooting, or the Silence Survivors Face on Not Being Heard)

---

As you listen, consider what these survivors have endured: the trauma of being shot or losing someone to gun violence compounded by the mostly invisible aftermath they face.

I provided several laminated copies of these instructions for exhibit-goers listening to the audio pieces that I created of each of the three narrators.

*Following are the partial transcripts, which I invited people to read out loud as a way to further embody the experience of the narrator.*

Kate Ranta Transcript

I was also fighting for a permanent restraining order. I got the temporary. The judge didn't make it permanent, he just extended it for another few months. So that happened several more times – every single time I asked for a permanent restraining order. Because he had violated it many times, many times. Like he sent a whole package of creepy cards, like obsessive “I love you,” like really creepy. He created a fake Facebook account, and tried to talk to me that way. He emailed the president, CEO, and the vice president of United Healthcare, which was my employer, and said that they have a rogue employee who's sleeping and drinking on the job and tried to make me lose my job. He vandalized my car, my Dad's car. One of the apartments I had moved into he broke into, and drew a penis on the wall of William's room in black light marker so it would show up. And the cops could never find anything, no fingerprints. They tried to get fingerprints on my car, my apartment, and they could never get anything. I could never prove any of it.

Deborah Parker Transcript

The sun was barely coming up and I remember it was just peaking through the windows a little bit, and there was a hard pound at the front door. I got up quickly, but when I got to the door, I stopped about two feet from it and I had trouble breathing. So I just took a deep breath and I slowly walked to the door and I gradually opened it. And there were two men standing there. One of them began to speak and he asked me, 'Are you Lindsay Key's Mom?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'There was a shooting at the party Lindsay was at. Lindsay was shot. I'm sorry to tell you this, but Lindsay did not survive her injuries.'

And I still can't believe somebody said those words to me. I still, eleven years later, can't believe Lindsay was killed. At that moment, a primal scream left my mouth that I didn't even know I could make. And I yelled, 'Lindsay's dead!'"

Kareem Nelson Transcript

And I got shot. I was still conscious. I hit the floor. I couldn't move. But I didn't know what was wrong so I was screaming for help. And the next thing you know, I heard the helicopters coming and I heard the ambulance, and they told me I was paralyzed.

---

We lost Dorian, Dorian died at sixteen. He got murdered. He got shot in his head. That was my friend. That was my first instance of gun violence. I think I was – 1989, we lost Dorian, 1989 – I think I was fourteen. At this time, we was fighting Edgemere. It was hard to go to school. It was just a mess then. And he had a baby mother, his baby mother, April, lived in Edgemere. And Dorian was trying to squash the beef between Ocean Village and Edgemere. One night, three guys from Edgemere walked to the back of the projects and now Dorian came running out ahead of everybody, and they just started shooting, and I see Dorian fall. When we got to him you could see the bullet in his head. And we was all kids.

*Cover image courtesy of Time.*  
*Holly Werner-Thomas.*  
*\* All interviews & copy by*

Bearing Witness to a Public Health Crisis



ABANDONED:  
Stories from Survivors of Gun Violence

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**Name:** Kareem Nelson  
**Date of birth:** August 17, 1974  
**From:** New York City (Harlem & Far Rockaway Queens)

An only child, Kareem Nelson was born in Harlem in August 1974 to Charisse Jackson and Michael Nelson. Charisse was twenty-one years old at the time, and raised Kareem alone, although he also lived with his grandfather and uncle until (contd.)

he was eight years old, when he and his mother moved to Far Rockaway Queens. Kareem says that he could see the Atlantic Ocean from their 13<sup>th</sup> floor Ocean Village apartment windows. It felt safe, he said, and the elevators worked. Across the street was a rival housing complex, though, Edgemere, in front of which Kareem would see his friend Dorian shot in the head and killed a few years later. The turf wars between the buildings go back decades, and are known as among the most deadly in New York City. (Around the same time that Kareem moved with his mother to Far Rockaway, a life expectancy study of teenagers in Harlem reported that 15-year-old boys from there had only a 37 percent chance of surviving to age 65, about the same as men in Angola.)

Kareem describes himself as “a spoiled child” whose mother would do anything for him, buy anything for him – G.I. Joes, and brand-name clothes – Wallebees, Baillies, and Bugle Boys. She also tried different educational avenues, and at one point, Kareem attended Carnegie Hill in Manhattan, where he said standards were high and he did well. He was offered a football scholarship at a boarding school in Rhode Island soon thereafter, but was afraid to live so far from home. Kareem attended Springfield Garden High School in Queens. And, he said, “That was the demise of me.” By then he had effectively dropped out of school. He started selling crack cocaine in 1986 when he was 12, and has memories of traveling back and forth on the A Train to Harlem. He began to see crack vials littering the streets, where he and his friends bought supply to sell in Far Rockaway. Some people had to sell to survive. “I just wasn’t one of them,” he said.

Later he would say, “I was relying on the drugs to bring me to the riches. I was conditioned to chase this money whether it cost me my freedom, whether it cost my mother her freedom, our lives, or whatever. And the pursuit of the money, in my mind, in hindsight, was always going to compensate for me not making it to the NFL.”

Dealing would eventually bring Kareem up and down the Eastern Seaboard, as far as Atlanta, and through Norfolk, Virginia and Baltimore. It was in East Baltimore that a rival drug dealer shot Kareem in the back “on Father’s Day,” as he puts it, “1995,” when he was 20. He was immediately paralyzed from the waist down. Persevering through PTSD and intense nightmares (“somebody was pulling my arms off” in one, “and beating me with my arms”), six months of suicide watch, and an eventual six-year stint in prison for conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine, Kareem founded Wheelchairs Against Guns in 2013. (Kareem began dealing again in 1997, because he only received \$538 a month to live on. “I never had a job in my life so the first check I got was a disability check,” he said.)

Since founding Wheelchairs Against Guns (WAG), Kareem has visited hundreds of New York-area schools where he talks to students about self-love and self-esteem, critical thinking, and conflict resolution.

“I am those kids who are deemed bad and troubled,” he said, adding: “These kids are not bad kids. These inner cities are rough. Don’t look at these kids as bad, that’s all I ask. Look at them as different from you with different circumstances. If you can have some type of empathy, you’ll understand what these kids are going through, because these children are up against something that’s serious.”



Bearing Witness to a Public Health Crisis

*\* All interviews & copy by Holly Werner-Thomas. Cover image courtesy of Time.*



ABANDONED:  
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**Name:** Kate Ranta  
**Date of birth:** October 22, 1972  
**From:** Lanoka Harbor, Lacey Township, New Jersey

110,000 Americans are shot on average every year. Between 30,000 and 40,000 die. Another 80,000 live. Yet we don't often hear about the lived realities of gunshot victims who survive or the people left behind when gunshot victims don't survive: from drawn-out trials, to medical and psychological complications, to the inability to work, and medical bills. Here is one survivor's story.

The oldest of two children, Kate Ranta was born and raised in Lanoka Harbor, Lacey Township, New Jersey. "It was really pretty remote when we first moved there," Kate said about Lanoka Harbor. "The street ended at our house." (contd.)

Kate left New Jersey for Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania, and has lived all over the U.S. since, including in California, Virginia, and Florida. After moving to Los Angeles, Kate worked in advertising as a media buyer for J. Walter Thompson, and as a legal assistant for an entertainment lawyer before moving to the Washington, D.C. area and entering the nonprofit world as an editor and writer. In 2007, she left nonprofits to begin work at United Healthcare, and says that she remained in the health and wellness industry for about ten years. During this time, her first marriage was breaking up and she met her second husband, Chris, in Northern Virginia. They had a son together, Henry; after two years, they parted ways.

Kate describes herself as both satisfied with life as a single working mother but also vulnerable after her second marriage broke up. Her parents, with whom she is close, moved to Northern Virginia for a time to be near her and Henry.

Kate met Thomas Maffei on Match, the online dating platform, in 2007. Maffei was an Air Force major. They corresponded and soon thereafter went on their first date. The relationship moved quickly. "He asked me to marry him within three months," Kate said. "I was pregnant by the New Year, and we eloped to Vegas in March '08."

Kate and Thomas's son, William, was born soon after their elopement. The couple moved to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and eventually to Coral Springs, Florida, where Kate's parents had moved, even as Maffei's behavior devolved from controlling to frightening. After one particularly harrowing incident, Kate called the police. She then filed a restraining order against him, which he violated, "many times - many times... It was constant stalking and harassing and scary behavior, and nobody ever did anything about it, ever."

While Kate was fighting for a permanent restraining order, the state of Florida seized Maffei's guns. But in Florida, you need to be convicted of a crime to be put into the background check system and therefore barred from buying a gun.

The night of the attack, Kate was home with her father and four-year-old son, and after her father warned her Maffei was coming - "Katie, call 911. Tom's here!" - they shut the front door against him. He fired through the door and shot her once he was inside when she was on the floor begging for her life in front of their screaming son. She put up her hand in self-defense and she felt her hand explode then he shot her again in the chest and her father in the chest and arm. Maffei used hollow-point bullets, the kind that open like an umbrella upon impact that are banned in international warfare but legal in the U.S., and a Beretta 9 MM handgun. "This was not a small gun," said Kate. "He wanted to do some massive damage." Both Kate and her father sustained non life-threatening injuries.

In the aftermath, Kate describes the trial as, "hanging over us for so long, it was debilitating." After facing him in court and enduring one mistrial, finally, in April 2017, Thomas Maffei was sentenced to 120 years in prison for the attempted murders of Kate Ranta and her father.

The physical and psychological trauma has been more long lasting. Kate and her father focused on their physical rehabilitation the first year, and it wasn't until late 2015 - three years after she was shot - that Kate "had a complete breakdown... I took three months off from work. I was ready to check in, like, in-patient, to a hospital." She said that while the trauma care provided for William has been consistent and good, the adults were left to figure it out by themselves. Kate, her father and William all suffer from PTSD. She and her father have been medicated for it. William is in ongoing therapy.

Nine women are shot dead every week by their husband or intimate partner.

*Cover image courtesy of Time.  
Holly Werner-Thomas.  
\* All interviews & copy by*

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**Name:** Lindsay Demoro Key  
**Date of birth:** May 26, 1987  
**From:** West Palm Beach, Florida

The oldest of three children, Lindsay Key was born in Florida in 1987 but grew up in the Phoenix, Arizona area after her parents, Gregory Key, a former minor league baseball player and West Palm Beach, Florida homicide detective, (contd.)

and Deborah Parker, a registered nurse originally from Wisconsin, divorced. Deborah remarried and Lindsay grew up with her stepfather, Tony, and two younger brothers, Tyler and Matthew, in Mesa and Chandler in neighborhoods carved out of the desert floor. Deborah said they were a happy family in the 1990s and early 2000s. “We were living the dream. I had a house full of love. I was at the top of the world.” Until December 3, 2006, when Lindsay, who was nineteen, was killed in a drive-by shooting. One of the guns used was an AR-15, and all were illegally obtained. Lindsay was sitting outside in a plastic lawn chair texting when five men drove slowly down the street with their headlights off. She was shot through the cheek and was still sitting in the chair when she died.

At the time of her death, Lindsay was living back at home with her family, going to college – she wanted to become a teacher – working as a waitress to help support herself, and raising her nine-month-old daughter, Patrice, alone after leaving her boyfriend. Her mother said it was unusual for Lindsay to go out, but she had organized with two friends from high school to go to a house party, and had asked Deborah to babysit. I said, “Of course, go out and have some fun for a change.”

“That night, she handed me Patrice, finished getting ready, and yelled at me, ‘They’re here!’ and went out the front door. I don’t think I even said goodbye. I didn’t say my usual, ‘I love you,’ and I still feel guilty I didn’t tell her I love her that last time.”

But the evening began to unravel around 11 PM when Deborah texted her daughter and did not get a response, which, she said, was unusual. She texted again at 11:30. Nothing. “As the evening progressed, my messages became more concerned and more frantic.” She couldn’t sleep, imagining a car accident and even possibly drunk driving. She woke up her husband around 2 o’clock and said “something’s wrong,” but he told her not to worry. She got up and showered and dressed and lay on her bed awake with a “sinking feeling of impending doom” and waited. Around sunrise, she heard, “a hard pound at the front door.” Two policemen stood there. After explaining that there had been a shooting, one said: “I’m sorry to tell you this but Lindsay did not survive her injuries.”

“And I still can’t believe that somebody spoke those words to me. I still, eleven years later, can’t believe Lindsay was killed.”

That the eleven-plus years since Lindsay was killed have been painful for Lindsay’s mother and family sounds obvious, but they have been painful in ways not often considered in a society unwilling to face the consequences of easy access to guns. To begin with, Deborah had to get over feeling that she wanted to kill herself, which she forced herself to do largely for her granddaughter, Patrice, a baby at the time. Because the murder was gang-related, she had to wait six years before the police gathered enough evidence to make any arrests, because “nobody would speak up.”

“By the time we were in court in 2013, it felt like it was forever,” she said. But then, “the trial itself was horrific.” It was so stressful that Deborah asked her doctor for medication in order not to vomit during it.

Deborah’s gun violence prevention activism began soon after Lindsay’s death as she tried to keep the shooting relevant in the local news media in order to help find the murderers. Today she works with Moms Demand Action, Everytown, and other groups to promote sensible gun legislation.

“After Lindsay’s death I became her voice because she could no longer speak,” she said.

There were 215 counts of shooting reported last year in Chandler, Arizona.

Blog Post for the *Oral History Review* online for the Oral History Association, Summer 2018.

[The Laramie Project, Documentary Theater & Oral History Performance](#)

*In this post, writer, historian, and activist Holly Werner-Thomas explores “verbatim theater” as a medium for disseminating oral histories, reflecting on her son’s recent high school’s performance of The Laramie Project .*

By Holly Werner-Thomas

Oral historians don’t always think of the theater as an outlet for their work.

This thought occurred to me last winter when my son, who was a freshman in high school, brought home the script for [The Laramie Project](#), a documentary play developed in 1998 after the murder of gay college student [Matthew Shepard](#) in Laramie, Wyoming. The brutality of the murder focused international attention on homophobia, and eventually led to the [Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act](#), which President Obama signed into law in 2009.

Playwright and theater director Moisés Kaufman has said that the idea for The Laramie Project originated in his desire to understand Matthew Shepard’s murder, why it happened in Laramie, and how Laramie is both different from and similar to anywhere else in America. He asked the members of his theater company, the New York-based [Tectonic Theater Project](#), “What can we as theater artists do as a response to this incident? And, more concretely, is theater a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?”

In order to answer these questions, he and nine other members of the Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie in November 1998, only four weeks after Matthew Shepard’s murder, “to collect interviews that might become material for a play.” The theater group visited the town several times over two years and collected more than 200 interviews. The Laramie Project debuted in 1999 in Denver at the Denver Center Theatre (the closest regional theater to Laramie), moved to the Union Square Theatre in New York, and by November 2000, staged in Laramie. The play was also published that year and produced off-Broadway, with HBO airing a star-studded film of The Laramie Project in 2002. The play has also been produced internationally – in 2016 in Uganda, for example, where same sex relationships are criminalized – and by more than 400 regional, university, and high school theaters, including, most recently, my son’s high school in Washington, D.C., where he played Harry Woods, a gay 52-year-old Wyoming man, alongside four other roles. (Twenty-one high school cast members played about five roles each.)

The performance impelled me to think about [verbatim theater](#) (that is, plays that are constructed verbatim from interviews) from an oral historian’s point of view. It confirmed the suspicion I had that oral historians don’t always think of theater as an outlet for their work, or more specifically, of collaborating with theater producers and writers. And that perhaps they should.

There are exceptions of course. Both scholar [E. Patrick Johnson’s Sweet Tea](#) and the Living Histories Ensemble of Concordia University’s Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, which produced [Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations](#) are examples.

Johnson conceived his much-lauded book, [Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History \(2008\)](#) as an oral history collection, before deciding that “the verbal ties and mannerisms” of the narrators would be best performed. Johnson’s work recalls that of [Anna](#)

[Deavere Smith](#), who is perhaps best known for her pioneering one-person verbatim play, [Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities](#) (1992). Yet both Johnson and Deavere Smith are performers and scholars who use oral history methods to compile the stories they want to tell, not academic oral historians who turned to the stage.

Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations, on the other hand, was organized by Concordia as an oral history project from 2007-2012 in order to record and explore the experiences and memories of refugees and other displaced persons who had settled in Montreal. The resulting performances were “by, for, and about [the] communities” involved—in other words, self-referential.

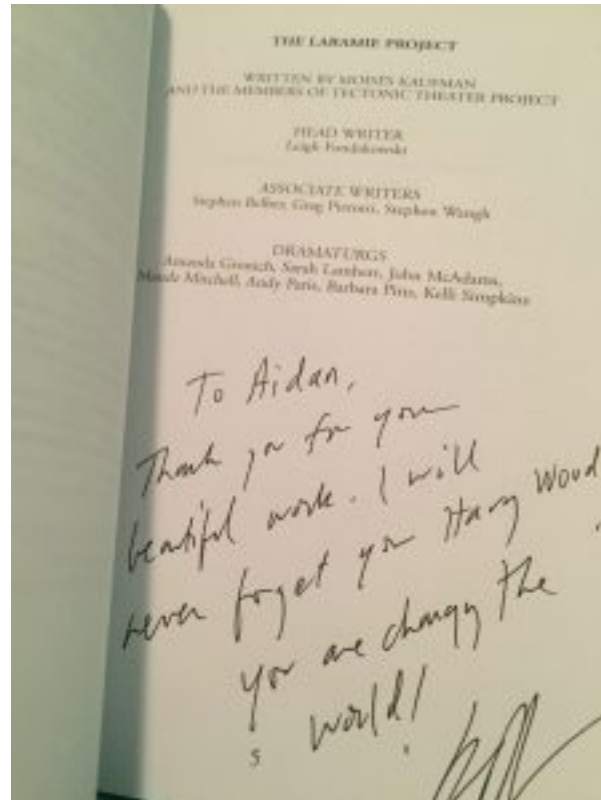
Since the first production of *The Laramie Project* nearly 20 years ago, verbatim theater has evolved under the umbrella term documentary theater, which is a form of nonfiction theater that incorporates, but is not limited to, re-creation drawing on interviews. For example, in 2000, the Brooklyn theater company [The Civilians](#), introduced the idea of “investigative theater,” which, according to its [mission statement](#), “brings artists into dynamic engagement with the subject of their work. [This] ethos extends into production, [where we invite] audiences to be active participants in the inquiry before, during, and after the performance.” The [Life Jacket Theatre Company](#)’s motto is “Creating Theatre from Real Events,” and its [mission](#) is clear: “Through field interviews and archival research, we share real stories about diverse human experiences, particularly those living on the margins — the outsiders, outcasts, and outliers.” In sum, the efforts of documentary theater makers are what [one writer in American Theatre magazine](#) called, “a multifaceted attempt to unearth bare truth through theatrical storytelling and engage audiences in meaningful conversation.”

What can academic oral historians learn from these theatrical presentations?

Toward this effort, recent topics in American documentary theater have included: how [Ayn Rand’s philosophy of objectivism](#) reverberates through American society today (AYN RAND: Trauma Response) from [The Builders Association](#) in Brooklyn; a play about sex offenders in Florida ([America is Hard to See](#)) from the Life Jacket Theatre Company; and a play titled [Tangles & Plaques from the Neo-Futurists](#) of Chicago that explores dementia and memory. Each of these nonfiction plays relies upon documentary source material, especially interviews, but also court transcripts, newspapers, and journal entries.

People who work in theater have propelled oral history performance, rather than oral historians who have turned to the stage; yet oral historians also want to engage audiences in meaningful conversation. As academics, they attempt to unearth the truth, and to interpret and disseminate it via publication or another public means, such as exhibits or podcasts. What, then, can academic oral historians learn from these theatrical presentations?

There are differences, of course, between the disciplines: theater producers and playwrights consider documentary performance, like all performance, from the vantage point of storyfirst, and sometimes fret over the responsibility of telling others’ real-life stories, while oral historians accept this as a given (Not that we don’t fret!). I argue that at least for oral historians focused on current events or the recent past who desire to spark a dialogue, hold a mirror up to society in an effort to reveal truths, or promote social change, performance represents an opportunity to reach new audiences. The immediacy of the spoken word and the opportunity for deep listening are abundant in theater.



THE LARAMIE PROJECT HEAD WRITER LEIGH FONDAKOWSKI'S INSCRIPTION TO THE AUTHOR'S SON.

There are lessons for oral historians too, in the willingness of theater makers to experiment with form and style, sometimes by making their processes transparent. For example, in one performance, the director had audience members read from the transcripts onstage. Theater producers and writers also allow themselves to eschew professional and temporal distance. The Laramie Project is an example of how to interview people in crisis: The creators met and spent time with people and were open to listening and learning. Leigh Fondakowski, the head writer of The Laramie Project, said that the first question they always asked was, “What do you love about Laramie?” This endeared them to Laramie residents, and they were invited back. She said the townspeople told the New Yorkers, “you seem like good listeners. Maybe you’ll set the record straight.”

Playwrights and theater producers aren’t waiting for oral historians to conduct the interviews for them, however. Like radio producers who have jumped on podcasting to create serial audio stories, theater makers focused on contemporary issues and making social change through art are doing it for themselves.

## Addendum on Funding

While *The 40% Project: An Oral History of Gun Violence in America*, will be housed at the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA) at Columbia University, donating the collection to CCOHA does not equal a fiscal sponsorship relationship. I am not allowed to use the CCOHA as my 501(c)3 partner through which to receive grants. And finding a willing 501(c)3 remains elusive. I believe this is for the following reasons: 1) the dearth of gun violence prevention (GVP) funding in general combined with the multi-pronged nature of the issue; 2) the internecine politics of GVP organizations and survivors; and, 3) oral history itself as a research methodology is not on the radar of enough GVP people/organizations.

I will comment on the latter two.

Although the number of gun violence victims is 110,000 Americans on average every year, a number that does not include the families and other people most affected, a small subset of those rebel against the status quo and become GVP activists as a result of their plight. And with the growth of their movement are complaints about how they have been treated by the major GVP organizations, and about how their voices are both quashed and used.

Buzzfeed News ran an article recently quoting two of the most visible survivors on the national stage, Sandy and Lonnie Phillips, whose daughter, Jessica Ghawi, was murdered in the Aurora movie theater mass shooting in 2012. (After their daughter was killed, they worked for the Brady Campaign doing survivor outreach.)

“I would call survivors and they would say, ‘I haven’t heard from [Brady] in three years,’” Sandy recalled in the article. “They don’t know what to do with survivors.” The experience, she said, made her realize that survivors are often used as “backdrops.” And after a few years, they and Brady parted ways.

The Phillips also noted that the organization’s then-head, Daniel Gross, who served from 2012 to September 2017, earned \$409,637 in 2016.

Kenny Barnes, Sr., one of my narrators, has told me on a number of occasions that he is “left out of the conversation,” in spite of his activism in Washington, D.C., and that the Brady Campaign, Moms Demand Action, and Mayors Against Illegal Guns (the latter two merged in 2013 to become Everytown) do not return his phone calls. He has also said that he has felt like a prop, and that Brady only call him when they need an African-American man in the audience. Still other survivors have felt burned by sharing their stories at all. Clai Lasher-Somers, a woman from New England who was shot by her stepfather more than fifty years ago, told me she won’t agree to be interviewed unless I spend time with her in New Hampshire after *The Trace* wrote only part of her story due to its own space constraints. (*The Trace* is an online nonprofit news organization dedicated to expanding coverage of guns in the U.S. It has since retracted the story.)

I am actually in talks with the Brady Campaign now regarding my oral history project. They have told me that they would fund it if they could (but cannot); and would like me to present my project and findings to them this fall. There is potential for them to create a page dedicated to



survivors on their website and for me to contribute to it. However, given how resented Brady is among some survivors, I will need to consider this carefully. I also think it's unlikely to happen.

For its part, Everytown remains focused on legislation. And the organization does use victim-survivors in its legislative efforts, who show up at town halls and the halls of Congress to demand reform. Still, it doesn't give much room otherwise to testimony; on its website today is a section called "Moments that Survive" to which anonymous (most are first-name only and without location) Americans tell their stories in 200 words or so.

In summary, then, while I am unlikely to receive funding as an individual (versus as an organization), it does not make sense for me to found my own 501(c)3 to try to compete with the limited resources devoted to gun violence and its aftermath. Yet without funding, my project remains stymied. While I will complete a total of at least thirty interviews for CCOHA, I will not be able to always travel everywhere I would like to.

It is in part for these reasons that I opened up my oral history to OHMA students and alumni in June 2019, because people have expressed interest, but also in order to potentially bring this project to the state and local levels, where I/we have a better chance of finding grant funding. (I will be working with OHMA alum Benji de la Piedra in Little Rock in 2020, where he teaches public history and wants to use my project with his students there.) Now that I have written a documentary play based on the interviews, I will also look for arts-based funding.

Regarding oral history itself as a research methodology, and one that is not on the radar of enough people/GVP organizations, it's interesting – even those people and organizations who do not need convincing that gun violence is a public health crisis, tend to use statistics over stories. As I begin to approach public health funders this year, it will therefore be my job to prove the benefits of oral history testimony.