

S5E3 The Battle over Guns in America – What’s Changed

[From News Reports] Child 1: “We heard a loud bang. We thought that something fell. Then we heard another.

Teacher: It sounded like the type of gun that just shoots over and over and over again. I just told all of our students that we had to get in the bathroom. It was all I could think of. And I’m thinking in my mind, I’m the first classroom. I thought we were all going to die.

Child 2: We all put our hands on other people’s shoulders and then our teacher led us out...

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I’m Emily Hanford.

Shannon Watts: I can remember a very cold December day, folding laundry, and seeing breaking news that there was an active shooter in an elementary school in a place called Newtown, Connecticut, somewhere I had never heard of. ... And I remember thinking, you know, just dear God, don't let this be as bad as it seems...

As we all know now, you know, it's 100 times worse, really, than we can even fathom that 20 children and six educators would be slaughtered in the sanctity of an American elementary school.

This is Shannon Watts. At the time of Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting she lived in Indiana, far away from the tragedy unfolding in Newtown, Connecticut. She had put her career in corporate communications on hold and was a stay-at-home mom with five kids.

Shannon was like most Americans. She had never lost a loved one to gun violence. But she had seen lots of TV news stories about mass shootings.

Shannon: When I was in college in the early 90s the shooting tragedy happened inside a restaurant called Luby's -- that's a pretty popular diner in Texas.

News Reporter: It was just afternoon. The cafeteria was jammed.

Shannon: I can just remember being so impacted and crying and kind of just sitting on the couch glued to the television and just amazed that this was happening in our country. And shooting after shooting happened and there was always a reason for me not to get involved.

With each new tragedy, Shannon kept expecting someone to do something to prevent the next one. Then Arizona Congresswoman Gabby Giffords was shot in the head at a meet-the-candidate event.

Shannon: OK, this is it

Six people died, including a 9-year-old girl. Giffords suffered severe brain damage and paralysis.

Shannon: Someone will act now because this is a member of Congress. This is one of their own.

But Congress did nothing... because of the power of the National Rifle Association. Only two members of Congress were willing to even introduce legislation to limit access to guns. Neither of them could get their bills out of committee.

Then, on Dec 12, 2012, came the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. Shannon watched the coverage on TV while folding laundry. The next day she thought: I'm going to do something.

Shannon: I actually woke up angry, in part because I was seeing pundits and politicians on the TV saying, no, the solution to this was somehow more guns, that if everybody had been armed, this shooting wouldn't have happened.

I was sitting at my kitchen counter and I was looking for organizations to join, something like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which had been so influential to me as a teen growing up in the eighties. I really I wanted to be part of a badass army of women, of moms who are working on this issue, because that's how it affected me.

She didn't find the kind of group she was looking for. So she decided to start one herself. She called her group Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. At first it was just a Facebook group.

Over the past eight years, the organization has grown – a lot. It became a nonprofit and merged with another group – Mayors Against Illegal Guns – to become an organization called Everytown for Gun Safety. They now have chapters in all 50 states and report nearly 6 million supporters. Six million. That’s a grassroots base big enough to rival the National Rifle Association.

Shannon: In retrospect, shame on us for it taking a shooting in a predominantly white school in a wealthy community to get that wakeup call because gun violence had been happening in marginalized communities for decades.

But better late than never.

On this episode of Ways and Means we ask – how did the gun control movement become a force in American politics -- after being overshadowed for so long by the NRA?

This season of Ways and Means is supported by POLIS, the center for politics at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy. I’m Deondra Rose, director of research for POLIS. We prepare future political leaders and foster innovative scholarship related to the most pressing political issues of our time. Find out more at polis.duke.edu.

(Music)

[From a 1999 news report] News Anchor Tom Brokow: Good evening everyone. The reaction of so many people today was Oh no not again... Another high school. Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado this time on the edge of Denver. It has been a horror. The spokesman for the local sheriff’s office speaks of as many as 25 fatalities...

We’re going back in time. To 1999. The Columbine shooting. It hit home for Kristin Goss. She had gone to a high school nearby.

Columbine got her thinking about America’s response to gun violence. Now Kristin Goss is a professor of political science and public policy at Duke University.

Kristin Goss: Our gun violence problem is acute and it's unusual by global standards.

The United States has a higher gun homicide rate than any other industrialized nation. The U.S. also is a consistent leader in gun suicides.

Kristin: And yet Americans who consider this to be a problem and favor, by most polls, reasonable restrictions on firearms, never really seemed to be mobilizing in a serious way to pound the pavement and pound on lawmakers' doors to help remedy the problem.

From the early 1990s on, polling data has shown significant numbers of Americans support stricter gun laws. But that support wasn't translating into legislation.

Kristin: This is a movement that has a lot of people who are concerned, but has traditionally struggled to raise enough money to be a serious counterweight to the mighty National Rifle Association, which is the big gun rights organization.

The NRA was founded in 1871 for recreational shooting enthusiasts and it grew into a powerful political force. More than half of congressional incumbents in 2018 had received NRA contributions at some point.

For years, the NRA has successfully blocked dozens of federal and state gun control initiatives. Their core argument is that any restriction on guns threatens the right to bear arms guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Kristin Goss knew all of this. But she wondered why -- when substantial numbers of Americans wanted change -- why couldn't anyone successfully take on the NRA?

Kristin: So, that was the puzzle that I set out to unravel. What is going on with this missing movement for gun control in America?

She began by looking at other successful movements for policy reform, including the anti-abortion movement and the anti-smoking movement. She identified three factors of successful reform movements.

One, they have a message that resonates with everyday people.

Two, they have a coherent strategy.

And three, they have money.

Kristin: People, when they think about social movements, imagine that they just spring up organically and sustain themselves through sheer outrage and passion and grit. And, you know, there's some truth to that. But it's sort of a simplistic view.

Kristin found that every successful social reform movement has patrons - wealthy individuals, or philanthropic foundations, or both.

When it comes to philanthropy, the US has plenty of resources that can be marshalled to support a cause.

Kristin: Right now in America, we have something like a 100,000 philanthropic foundations and they have something like 740 billion dollars in assets. That's three-quarters of a trillion dollars that they're sitting on and they give about 66 billion dollars a year away just to charitable causes. That's a lot of money.

Traditionally, philanthropists have supported things like hospital wings, the arts, and scholarship funds. They've also paid for some things that might surprise you.

Joel Fleishman: I give speeches all the time. I describe a situation. And I said, do you have any idea where that came from?

Joel Fleishman is a professor of policy and law at Duke and one of the nation's leading philanthropy scholars.

Joel: Well, the answer is almost always, it comes from foundations and nobody knows it. Not even experienced people.

Take the 911 emergency response system.

Joel: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a brand new foundation at that point in 1972, decided that it was scandalous that there was no single emergency response number in the United States, unlike other countries. And so they said, you know, this is something that we can fix.

So they put together a network and created the 9 1 1 emergency response number, built it and then turned it over to the federal government. That's just one example.

Individuals also use their wealth to address things governments can't or won't address. In the 1920s and 30s, long before the Civil Rights movement, Julius Rosenwald spent most of the fortune he had amassed as president of Sears Roebuck & Co to build schools for African American children. He financed nearly 5,000 schools throughout the rural South.

Joel: If the government isn't doing things that people want it to do - not dealing with needs that the people have -- then people come with their own money and try to mitigate the harm. So, you get all these all these different views reflected in the way people give money.

But when Kristin Goss started studying gun violence, she saw pretty quickly that the gun control movement had trouble attracting financial support that was substantial and sustained.

Kristin: You might see a high-profile event, an assassination of a famous person or, you know, a mass shooting. And then these groups would see a flood of donations from everyday people sending \$10 or \$25. But the attention would then quickly fade, and so would the group's fortunes.

There's no question that in the 2000s and really leading up to about 2012, the gun control movement was in a kind of a doldrums period. There was not a lot of money flowing into those organizations. Foundation funding was pretty flat.

Meanwhile, the National Rifle Association was thriving. Kristin says the NRA has some key advantages that gun violence prevention groups typically don't.

Kristin: They have a lot of ways to attract members and members pay member dues. Let's imagine I'm a gun collector or a hunter... I might join the NRA because I get a magazine that will educate me about my hobby that will provide other kinds of benefits that come with membership, so discounts and that kind of thing.

Gun owners also go on hunting trips. They meet up at shooting ranges. They have a shared interest that brings them together to DO things.

Woman 1: This match is one of the premiere matches in the country.

Woman 2: I'm having a ball and so are all the other contestants that I've seen.

Kristin: All of these social spaces that are built around an enjoyable activity also can provide spaces for political activities, for sharing political information, for forming a kind of a collective identity around our role as hunters or sports shooters or Second Amendment advocates or whatnot.

And the gun control side just doesn't have those sort of natural meeting spaces.

But Kristin says things started to change in 2007. 33 people were killed in a mass shooting at Virginia Tech University. Survivors and families organized and succeeded in changing gun policy at the state and national levels. They provided a model for how survivors can organize for political action.

Kristin: Those folks have come together in a critical mass and are lending kind of a new sense of moral authority to the cause. And equally important, a lot of them are doing it as part of organizations. They're paid staff. They're leaders of organizations.

Around the same time as the Virginia Tech shooting, another powerful force took hold in America: social media. Kristin says Facebook and Twitter were especially powerful for organizations like Shannon Watts' group Moms Demand Action. Mothers who might never have found each other now had a place to meet and organize.

Kristin: Social media is allowing people to find one another to share messages to create a shared identity around stopping gun violence and coming together as survivors, as family members, as moms, as people who could be victims.

And Kristin says a big shift was beginning on the funding side, too. Major foundations that used to shy away from controversy were starting to get involved in issues like energy policy and criminal justice reform. Today, more than half of the leading U.S. philanthropists – the richest of the rich -- are using their money to address vexing and controversial policy issues. Including gun control.

Kristin: The amount of money that just foundations -- I'm not talking about individual people, just foundations--- have given to gun control groups has increased by 12-fold just in the last 15 years. And the number of funders has increased 9-fold.

Another pivotal moment came after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December of 2012. That's when Shannon Watts, fed up and angry, sat at her kitchen table searching Facebook for a group to join. And decided to start her own group when she couldn't find one.

Shannon: About six months into starting Moms Demand Action. I realized that we were growing ... and that we had this huge grassroots network that was forming, but we had very few financial resources and also, frankly, human resources, right.

And people really weren't that interested in giving large amounts of money to this woman they had never heard of from Indiana.

And so I started interviewing organizations to kind of say, I've got this grassroots network to bring you, what can you bring us?

One of the groups she talked to? Mayors Against Illegal Guns, an organization co-founded by former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Bloomberg has donated more than \$10 billion of his personal wealth to address big problems like climate change and opioid addiction. He and Shannon Watts teamed up on gun control, creating a new umbrella group we mentioned earlier called Everytown for Gun Safety. Bloomberg bankrolled it with \$50 million dollars.

Shannon: Mike came in as the largest donor we had, which really ... turbocharged our organizing efforts. So, his donation essentially funds the staff that we have and the administrative piece, but we have to keep growing the donor part of the organization.

Bloomberg's backing was the financial catalyst the "missing movement for gun control" had lacked for so long.

Then in 2018, another mass shooting at a school. This time it was Marjorie Stoneman Douglass high school in Parkland, Florida.

News Reporter: A heartbreaking day in Florida, and sadly an all too familiar one. 17 people are now confirmed dead after police say that a shooter believed to be just 19 years old opened fire at his former high school. Over and over again this year...

Within weeks, grieving survivors took to the streets to push for stricter gun laws. The teenagers staged a march on Washington, funded by A-list celebrities including George Clooney and Oprah Winfrey.

Other students staged sibling marches in all 50 states, creating a wave of protest on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War.

Protest Audio 1: [Chanting] 17 lives. 17 minutes, 17 lives.

Protest Audio 2: [Chanting] We want change! We want change!

Protester 1: We want a bump stock ban, we want assault weapons bans in all states, we want our Congresspeople to stop taking money from the NRA. And finally, most importantly, we want the background checks to be reinforced, we want more background checks, we want it to be really hard to get a gun.

Protest Audio 3: [Chanting] When I say gun, you say law. Gun, laws! Gun, laws!

Protester 2: We lose confidence in our government because we are told that nothing can be done time and time again. We are tired of hearing that because we know there can be change in this country. Never again should a tragedy of this caliber happen in this country. Never again.

Emma Gonzalez: [Timer beeps] Since the time that I came out here, it has been 6 minutes and 20 seconds. The shooter has ceased shooting and will soon abandon his rifle, blend in with the students as they escape and walk free for an hour before arrest. Fight for your lives before its someone else's job. [Cheering]

Everytown for Gun Safety had spent \$1 million to help the young activists organize.

When the wave of protests ended, Everytown channeled the energy and momentum into a new branch of their group -- called Students Demand Action.

Shannon: After the Parkland shooting tragedy in 2018, we tripled in size as an organization because so many Americans decided to get off the sidelines.

The group has seen its number of small donors grow from 70,000 in 2017 to 375,000 in 2019. Shannon says Bloomberg's money now makes up just one quarter of Everytown's contributions.

Everytown for Gun Safety has become such a dominant force that 80 percent of all revenues flowing into U.S. gun violence prevention groups now go to that group. Eighty percent of ALL revenue. This is Duke professor Kristin Goss again.

Kristin: That organization really has become the 600-pound gorilla in the gun violence prevention movement.

The organization has all the important ingredients of an effective reform movement that Kristin identified in her research. It has a lot of money. It has a clear message about what it calls "sensible" gun laws aimed at ensuring safety. It has active members in all 50 states. And, it has a coordinated strategy: it is focused on electing candidates who support gun restrictions and holding those officials accountable. Here's Shannon Watts again.

Shannon: We actually needed people to show up the way that some NRA members had. To show up in state houses, to be a presence at gun bill hearings, to show, essentially to show lawmakers that when you do the right thing, we'll have your back, when you do the wrong thing, we'll have your job. That's what the NRA had done for a long time.

And when you change the makeup of a state legislature or the makeup of Congress, you have a better chance of passing good bills.

The group's strategy and financial strength are making an impact.

Shannon: You know, I hear often, well, nothing has changed on this issue and nothing could be further from the truth. Yes. We're all waiting for this cathartic moment in Congress that hasn't come. But our candidates, when

going up against an A-rated NRA candidate, won about 77 percent of the time. And then in Virginia, in 2019, we outspent the NRA 8 to 1.

140 new gun safety and gun control laws have been enacted at the state level in the two years since the Parkland High School shooting. In Virginia, for example, the legislature passed measures to increase background checks, limit handgun purchases and establish a so-called "red flag" law.

Kristin Goss says gun control activists have had some important victories. But she says there have been plenty of victories on the gun rights side, too.

Kristin: Gun laws, particularly around carrying concealed weapons in public, have been dramatically relaxed in the last 20 to 30 years. I think it's really important to note that most of the real strengthening of gun laws has happened in liberal states, on the coasts, and not in, kind of, the rural red states in the center of the country.

Kristin says the gun control movement is no longer "missing in action." But it is still playing catch up in a big way. In 2016 gun rights groups had \$440 million dollars on hand. Gun control groups had only about \$95 million.

Kristin: Now, that \$95 million is a huge amount for the gun violence prevention movement historically, but it's still only 20 percent, roughly, of what the gun rights groups have.

Shannon Watts knows what she's up against.

Shannon: I always say this work is a marathon, not a sprint.

My goal at the beginning was, you know, if something happened to me, if I was not able to continue in a role as founder for whatever reason, that the organization would still go on. And I know without a doubt now that it will, that this organization, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, will be there to not just achieve the wins we need, but to protect those wins after they're made.

That's a key part of this, right? You can't pass good bills and then move on. You need an organization that is strong and robust. And that's what we've built.

This season of Ways & Means is supported by POLIS, the center for politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. Find out more at polis.duke.edu.

Ways & Means is a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Kristin Goss is a faculty member at Sanford. Her latest book about guns is *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know*. She co-authored it with Philip Cook, who is also a Sanford School professor. Kristin's earlier book is *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*.

For more on the world of philanthropy, check out Professor Joel Fleishman's book, *The Foundation: A Great American Secret; How Private Wealth is Changing the World*. We'll have links to all of these books at our website, ways-and-means-show-dot-org.

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