

Ed Gross's speech at the Sandy Hook Candlelight Vigil and Memorial

I find it hard to believe that three years have passed since the brutal murders of 20 elementary school students and 6 staff members in Newtown, Connecticut. That is the awful tragedy that haunts me and the one that galvanized enough ordinary citizens like me and many of you to create The Bergen County Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence. But, of course, tens of thousands of Americans have lost their lives at the barrel of a gun since then. And countless more lives have been frankly ruined as well. Those include lives of the injured, of course, but we must never forget the damage done to the survivors: the parents and children, spouses, family and friends of gun victims who suffered a terrible loss and no doubt are suffering still.

Do you imagine that any of them thinks of their loss as a trade-off? Unthinkable, but in a very real way lives lost to gun violence are the trade-off we make as a country when we treat gun ownership as sacrosanct. Every time a state or the federal government allows military-style weapons to be purchased legally or keeps oversized ammunition clips legal, that's a tradeoff with lives that will be lost. Every time we fail to pass universal background checks or close the gun show loophole or fail to crack down on gun running and straw purchases, that's a tradeoff with lives that will be lost. Perhaps, worst of all, every time states strengthen so-called gun rights so that guns can be carried openly and/or in more places like schools and churches, we know for a fact that the tradeoff will be lives that will be lost. We've seen the results too many times in places like Colorado Springs and Charleston, South Carolina.

In three years I've learned more about guns, gun laws and especially gun violence victims than I ever wanted to know. But there's one phrase that bothers me every time I hear it. It's the phrase law-abiding gun owners. I keep coming back to it. But why? After all, there certainly are law-abiding gun owners. Some of you may be gun owners and, if you're here to attend this vigil, you are undoubtedly law-abiding. In point of fact, I'm sure that the vast majority of gun owners have never used a gun to commit a crime. So again, why does it bother me so much? It's because no one knows when the gun of a law-abiding gun owner will injure or kill someone. Sometimes children get a hold of their parents' guns and accidentally end a life. Often, law-abiding gun owners, especially military veterans, turn their guns on themselves and commit suicide – more than 20,000 Americans a year. Studies show that not having a ready weapon would save the vast majority of their lives. Even gang members and criminals can legally purchase a gun and claim to be law-abiding until the first time they use that gun to kill. Most disturbing of all is the type of danger that brought us here tonight. Mass murder can be committed by so-called law abiding citizens. Think about that. Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik who recently gunned down 14 innocent people in San Bernadino were first-time killers with legally purchased weapons.

And, in Newtown, Connecticut, three years ago today, guns purchased legally by Adam Lanza's mother were used by her mentally ill son. Nancy Lanza was a law-abiding gun owner, wasn't she? Should anyone be glad that our country protected her second amendment rights? You tell me how to know which law-abiding gun owners will keep their guns absolutely secure and never use them in anything but the direst situation for self-defense. Tell me that and I'll start worrying about how to protect their right to own a gun. Until then, I along with you, will continue to do whatever I can to prevent gun violence.