



GUNS IN AMERICA: 41 STORIES OF SURVIVAL

PEOPLE AFFECTED BY GUN
VIOLENCE SHARE ACCOUNTS
OF PAIN, FORGIVENESS
AND THEIR PATHS FORWARD

BY JEANNINE AMBER

G

wendolyn Reed of Conway, South Carolina, has not been able to sleep in the dark since 1987, when she was 11 years old. That's the year her father, Samuel Reed, Jr., was murdered. In 2013 tragedy struck again. Reed's sister, Ebony Spann Parson, 28, was killed by her estranged boyfriend, who then turned the gun on himself. Less than two weeks earlier, he'd been charged with criminal domestic violence after reportedly beating Parson. He was out on bond when he took a 20-gauge shotgun to a bingo parlor and shot Parson dead. "I lost my childhood and my best friend to gun violence," says Reed. "No one should go through this."

The United States currently has a gun homicide rate more than 25 times higher than other developed nations, according to a 2016 report. Experts say the most powerful step in reducing the death toll is a simple one: Gun sellers should be required to run background checks at the time of purchase and deny sale to convicted felons and people with certain domestic violence charges or a dangerous mental illness. States with universal background checks have 46 percent fewer women shot to death by their partners, 48 percent fewer firearm suicides and 48 percent less gun trafficking, according to the national organization Everytown for Gun Safety. Despite these numbers, all but 18 states still allow handguns to be sold without checks by individuals making "private sales," which may happen anywhere including gun shows or online. This is the dangerous loophole that survivors like Reed want to close. She is one of 3 million members of Everytown who've joined together to lobby for change.

The people featured in the following pages represent almost every state in the country. They each tell a unique story about the impact gun violence has had on their lives. Sometimes the crime occurred decades earlier, far away from their current location in a new town, and for others the pain is fresh, having happened recently in their own backyards. No matter the circumstance, they share the same goal: to have you join the fight for sensible gun regulation and better safety for us all. "You have a right to own a gun," says Reed. "But you don't have the right to take an innocent life."

COLORADO

In 2004 U.S. Representative Rhonda Fields's son, Javad Fields, witnessed a shooting. He spoke to the police and was set to testify against the assailant. Days before the trial, he and his fiancée, Vivian Wolfe, both 22, were gunned down at an intersection. After their deaths, Fields [D-Colo.], 61, fought successfully for better witness protection and sensible gun regulation in her state. "Our background checks are saving lives," she says, noting that the state has denied thousands of gun purchases since enacting more comprehensive background checks in 2013. "People joined

together and said enough of the bloodshed. It's time to do something."



WASHINGTON, D.C.

Nardyne Jefferies, 46, was fiercely protective of her only child. But on March 30, 2010, she agreed to let her 16-year-old daughter, Brishell Jones, attend the funeral of a young man from the neighborhood who'd been murdered. After the service, gunmen, including one with an AK-47-style rifle, fired shots into the crowd gathered outside the church, killing Jones and three others. "I'd like to see high-power military weapons, like the one

that killed my daughter, regulated better," says Jefferies. "These shooters are not exercising their Second Amendment rights, they are looking for something that will spray as many bullets as possible. We can make America safer, but it's going to take all of us doing our part."



NORTH CAROLINA

"My grandbaby Elijah was 21 inches long with a full head of hair," says **Effie Steele**, 67, describing the infant who died before he'd taken his first breath. Steele's daughter, Ebony Robinson, was 21 years old and nine months pregnant

when she was killed by the baby's father. "We took Elijah out of Ebony's body, cleaned him up and buried him in her arms," says Steele, who successfully lobbied for a state bill that allows prosecution in the death of an unborn child.

FLORIDA

Torrey Donnell Manuel, 29, was shot and killed on January 1, 2003. His aunt, Angela Williams, 55, will never forget the sight of his lifeless body on the living room floor. After his death she founded Mothers Against Murderers Association (MAMA) to give survivors "a place to call hope," she says. "I've been >

ICONS: THE NOUN PROJECT

COURTESY OF SUBJECTS



WISCONSIN When he was still an infant, **KHARY PENEBAKER's** mentally ill mother pulled over to the side of the road and shot herself dead. "Every 25 minutes someone shoots and kills themselves," says Penebaker, 38, who is currently running for Congress in Wisconsin's Fifth District. "If mental health is an issue, let's remove guns from the equation. That would save lives, but we aren't even having the conversation." To learn more about how changing gun laws can help prevent suicide, visit everytownresearch.org.

to 317 funerals. I try to help mothers move from victim to survivor to advocate. I get calls at three o'clock in the morning and talk to them until they fall asleep. This is not something any mother should have to deal with alone." For more information, visit mothersagainstmurderersasn.org.

MISSISSIPPI

"I was 5 years old when my mother was shot to death in front of me," recalls Pastor Lorenzo Neal, 41, of New Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jackson. Years later Neal found himself advocating against the Mississippi Church Protection Act, a bill that would allow people to bear firearms inside churches. "We know there is evil in the world," says Neal. "But I want our country to be a place of peace." Despite Neal's efforts, on April 15, 2016, Governor Phil Bryant, a Republican, signed the act into law.

NEW YORK
Akeal Christopher died on his fifteenth birthday, after being shot days earlier on June 27, 2012. He had been struck down when he was walking from a party in Brooklyn. His 9-year-old brother, Christopher Underwood, is determined to make a change by speaking out about gun

violence as the first junior ambassador for the national organization Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (momsdemandaction.org). "Kids may be little but we are loud," he says. "I want to use my voice for my generation. Don't I deserve to grow up in a world without guns in the streets?"

GEORGIA

Stephanie Stone's son, Paul R. Sampleton, was supposed to graduate high school this year. But on December 19, 2012, the 14-year-old freshman was shot in the head during a home invasion orchestrated by a boy he knew from school. "I miss his silliness," says Stone, 47. "He wanted to be a marine biologist, and I'd say, 'Baby, you can't swim!' Gun violence takes away dreams and hopes. I'll never be a grand-mother or a meddling mother-in-law. I long for my child. I have to push through that each and every day."

ALABAMA

Krystal Joy Bennett, 19, and her best friend, Terrin Greer, 17, both kissed Bennett's mom, Sylvia Bennett-Stone, on the cheek and said, "I love you," as they left for a Fourth of July party in 2004. Later that night the girls were killed in crossfire at a gas station. "The bullet went through Krystal's body and

lodged in Terrin's heart," says Bennett-Stone, 54. "I thought I had done everything right: good schools, good neighborhood, good morals. You don't have to live in a violent neighborhood. Violence can come to you."

KANSAS

LaTonya Boyd's two granddaughters were still in diapers when their father shot and killed their mother, 21-year-old **Tyeshia McNair**, and her friend Terrence Clark, 21, on October 13, 2009. Boyd, 52, is raising the girls now. "People need to know how to talk to survivors," says Boyd. "I did not lose my daughter. She was taken from me."

INDIANA

DeAndra Yates's son, DeAndre Knox, now 15, was at a birthday party on February 1, 2014, when someone outside started shooting into the house. A bullet hit DeAndre in the head, leaving him paralyzed from the mid-chest down and unable to speak. "Sometimes I can see his frustration when I am trying to change him and I am not moving fast enough," says Yates, 34. But she can also see his light shining through. During a recent visit to the rehab facility, he was happy

and bubbly," she says. She can see it in his eyes.

MASSACHUSETTS

In 2007, 13-year-old Steven Odom was rushing home to meet his 8 p.m. curfew when he was shot and killed steps away from his front door. "Steven wasn't the intended target," says his mother, Kim Odom, 53. "He was in the line of somebody's anger." Odom, a pastor at Dorchester's True Vine Church, now devotes her energy to reducing violence in her community. "I'm determined that my son's life not end on that sidewalk," she says. "His life will not be in vain." In 2014 a parcel of city-owned land was designated the Steven P. Odom Serenity Garden. In her son's name, her community has a place of peace.

IOWA

Calvetta Williams's friend Marion Harris, 32, was shot and killed on October 9, 2011. At a funeral for another murder victim the following year, Williams, 45, remembers the pastor imploring the congregation to "do something" about gun violence. She heeded the call. "I do faith-oriented events in my community," says the mother of five. "I speak to kids about the

importance of not picking up a gun. I want them to know there is a better way."

LOUISIANA

In 2006 the murder of 25-year-old local musician Dinerral Shavers rocked New Orleans. "He was a pillar in the community," says his sister, Nakita Shavers, 29. "I felt so cheated that he was taken from me. But his death gave me focus and lit a flame that no one can put out." Shavers created an educational fund in her brother's name (dsefnola.org) and aspires to be a career in politics so she can institute changes that will prevent more deaths.

MAINE

Darlen Richardson, 25, was asleep at home when an intruder broke in and started shooting. The assailant was never found, but police linked the weapon used to kill Richardson to another murder. "It was bought at a gun show," explains her father, Wayne Richardson, 61. "So there was no paperwork about the buyer and no background check performed. We are not antigun. But we want to close this dangerous loophole. Maybe if there had been background checks, the guy who killed my daughter wouldn't have been able to get a gun or we would have documents to track him down."

CONNECTICUT

The voice of Ana Grace Márquez-Greene rings out on the first track of her father Jimmy Greene's 2015 Grammy-nominated album *Beautiful Life*. The 6-year-old was one of 20 children and 6 adults killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 by mentally ill Adam Lanza. Her parents honor their child with the Ana Grace Project (anagraceproject.org), created by her mother, Nelba Márquez-Greene, to promote love and empathy among children. "My wife says in every classroom there is an Ana Grace and an Adam Lanza," says Greene, 46. "We have to reach them both."

KENTUCKY

"Where I live, guns are everywhere," says Diontae Reed, 15. "I used to think they were the only way to survive." In 2015 Reed was shot while playing basketball with some friends. "At first I wanted to retaliate," he says. Reed credits local activist Christopher 2X for showing him another path. "Now we go out in the community and I talk to groups and try to get people to put down their guns," says Reed. In September 2015 Reed joined with Christopher 2X to launch Hood 2 Hood, an organization aimed at promoting peaceful resolution in West Louisville.

MICHIGAN

In 2007, 14-year-old Dairea Bradley Hawkins was gunned down on his way out of a store after buying candy. Three years later his older brother, Quantrell Jamerson, 26, was murdered, leaving behind a wife and three young children. Their father, Pastor Jeffrey Hawkins, 49, of Prince of Peace Missionary Baptist Church in Flint, still battles his grief: "No matter how much work I do in the community, it's always present. One act of violence impacts so many people. It has to stop so the healing can begin."

MISSOURI

Ka'Vyea Tyson-Curry was in the passenger seat of his father's car on April 18, 2014, when the shooting began. His dad, KaVyea Curry, 34, was killed. Tyson-Curry, now 12, was left paralyzed from the chest down. "The year before, he'd been running around at our family reunion," says his cousin Bernita Tyson-Gray, 58. "Now he lives with wires and a wheelchair. People hear someone's been shot, and they are desensitized. But this is not other people's problem. It's everybody's problem."

DELAWARE

Councilwoman Hanifa Shabazz, 61, was devastated by the gun violence she saw around her in 2012. That year

Wilmington had a rate of violent crime more than four times the national average. "I knew this was not the nature of my people," she says. "There had to be some outside factors causing this death and destruction." In 2013 she contacted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and asked it to study the crisis. Its landmark report, released last November, includes recommendations that Shabazz is pushing to adopt. "I want us to be looked at as the city that resolved gun violence," she says. "The CDC gave me a higher authoritative voice. Now I can say, 'You have to change this. It's a public health crisis.'"

RHODE ISLAND

Five years ago Diana Garlington's 21-year-old daughter, Essence Christal, was killed in a drive-by while driving with her boyfriend. "I feel like I let my child down by not protecting her," says Garlington, 48. "I won't let that happen again." She began a female empowerment program in Christal's name. In February 2016 Garlington was honored as Providence Hometown Hero by a local news station for her efforts. "If I don't push forward, I would be failing Essence in death also."

OREGON

The last thing Bryant Cephus said to his son, Taureq, was >

OHIO "I went out to get snacks before *Jeopardy!* came on," says **WYLENE EDWARDS**, 62, recounting a quick trip to the store on a snowy night in January 2013. She flashed her headlights at two men standing in the road. As she drove past, one of them opened fire, hitting Edwards in her right and left shoulders. "I have seven grandchildren," she says. "I think about all the people I would have left behind. My family needs me."



TYSON-CURRY, COURTESY OF SUBJECT'S FAMILY; EDWARDS, COURTESY OF SUBJECT. (COURTESY OF SUBJECT'S FAMILY (3))

MARYLAND **TIMOTHY CURTIS, JR.**, remembers the nineties as a turbulent time. When he was 13 or 14, and playing with friends in a park not far from the White House, a gunman in a passing car opened fire. "We were kids," he says. "But we all knew to run, duck and hide." No one was hurt that day, but gun violence has taken many from Curtis, Jr.'s life: a best friend, his father, a cousin. "I'm an activist now," he says. "Instead of being a story of a statistic, I am a story of survival."



"I love you." "He was 15, and I was used to him not saying it back. But for some reason, I paused and waited, and he tilted his head back and said it, too," recalls Cephus, 49. "I am blessed for that." Taureq was fatally shot at a bus stop in 2008. "People need to get used to saying 'I love you' to their kids like it's the last time."

NEVADA

The memories still haunt Bilal Shabazz, 68. He saw a man get shot and killed in the street when he was 12 and living in Harlem. Then, in 1990, his daughter-in-law, who was seven months pregnant, was shot in an attempted robbery in Brooklyn. She survived; her unborn baby did not. "It's difficult reliving the incidents," says Shabazz. "In the face of gun violence, you can feel helpless." Shabazz has found support with the members of Everytown Survivor Network. "They've given me the strength to fight back," he says. If you are a survivor of gun violence, or know someone who is in need of support, visit everytown.org/survivors.

CALIFORNIA

"At first I thought it was a jackhammer," says Jamal Carver, 30. "I didn't understand the magnitude of what was happening." In 2007

Carver was shot in the arm and back by a gunman who had opened fire at Virginia Tech, killing 32 and injuring 30. "Moments of silence and candlelight vigils are not enough," he says. "We owe it to those we've lost and to those who've been injured to enact simple legislation that would combat gun violence. The average citizen doesn't need an assault rifle and high-capacity magazines. Those are weapons of war."

WEST VIRGINIA

"As a parent, the first thing that runs through your mind is, *What did I do wrong?*" says Deanna McKinny, 39, whose 18-year-old son, Tymel, was murdered on her front porch on April 23, 2014. "He was my love. But when you consume yourself with pain, you don't see the bigger picture. I've found out that the boy who killed my son had problems before. He had slipped through the cracks. We lose more than one person in a murder. That shooter is now in jail for the rest of his life."

ARKANSAS

A couple of weeks before Bendrell Urquhart, 24, was murdered in 2013, he'd gone to his mother, Shundia Austin, in distress. "I'm tired," Austin, 44, says he'd told her. She'd handed him her Bible and told him to give his troubles to God.

"After he was killed, I found the Bible in his home," she recalls. "He'd underlined passages and creased pages at the top. It was confirmation that I'd prepared my baby for his soul to rest in heaven."

WASHINGTON

For veterans returning home, "re-integration can be a tough transition," says former military medic Tommy Simpson III, 49. Post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and the availability of firearms can be a lethal combination. "Twenty-two veterans a day commit suicide," adds Simpson. "Most of those suicides are by guns." While homicide rates dominate the headlines, almost twice as many gun deaths in this country are people taking their own lives, according to the CDC. But help is available. If you, or someone you know, is in distress, visit the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at suicidepreventionlifeline.org or call its 24-hour hotline at 800-273-8255.

NEW MEXICO

Heather A.* was seven months pregnant in December 2014 when her husband fired his gun at her. "The gun was a constant threat," she says. "He was ex-military and

had firearms everywhere: in the cabinets, in drawers, on top of the fridge. He was suffering from PTSD. But I didn't realize the ramifications of that." Traumatized and afraid, Heather, 33, stayed with her husband until the baby was born, and then she escaped. "I would warn any woman that if a man says he's collecting guns to 'protect himself,' that's a red flag," she says. According to everytown.org, the presence of a gun makes it five times more likely that domestic violence will turn deadly. If you, or someone you know, is in danger, call the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 or visit thehotline.org.

NEBRASKA

"I learned how precious it is to live," says musician Devonte Abram, 24. In September 2010 Abram was shot during a home invasion. Abram grabbed a hunting rifle he'd gotten as a Christmas gift and fired at the intruder, who was critically injured but survived and was later arrested. "People mistake violence as the problem," says Abram. "But it's the symptom. Economic castration and lack of opportunities are the problem. As long as

people keep treating the symptom instead of the problem, we are never going to solve it."

PENNSYLVANIA

"My dad was everything to me," says Nadira Branch, 37. Her father, Richard Branch, was murdered in 1989, when she was 10. Branch channeled her grief into honoring her father's dreams. "He'd dropped out of high school but always said education is life-changing," she says. "I graduated from high school and college, went to an Ivy League graduate school and became a Fulbright Scholar and a Peace Corps volunteer. I've dedicated my education to him."

MINNESOTA

Mary Johnson-Roy's only son, Laramiun Byrd, was 20 years old when he was murdered in 1993. "I am a Christian woman," Johnson-Roy, 64, says. "But I was so filled with anger, I wanted the boy who killed my son to be locked up for life." Years later, inspired by a poem, she reached out to her son's murderer in prison. They developed a close relationship, a spiritual bond. "When I had all the bitterness inside me, I couldn't do anything," she says. "Now that I am set free, I am able to do what I was put here to do: share my story of forgiveness and reconciliation." In 2005 Johnson-Roy founded From Death to Life (fromdeathtolife.us), aimed at finding peace by

bringing together the families of victims and those who've caused them harm.

VIRGINIA

In 2014 Margaret Eaddy's 28-year-old son, Jonathan Bradley Coles, was trying to turn his life around, working toward his GED and pursuing his dream of becoming a mechanic. He was killed in the home of an acquaintance by a man with an extensive criminal history. "It's so easy to go to a gun show and walk out with an arsenal of weapons," says Eaddy, 50. "Politicians say they want America to be great, but other countries don't have this problem."



ILLINOIS

"Tommy was so protective," says Marsha Lee, 59, remembering how her 20-year-old son, Thomas Lee, would admonish her if he came home and found that she'd forgotten to lock her front door. In 2008 he was shot in an attempted robbery outside a convenience store and later died. "It doesn't matter how much time has lapsed," she says. "As a parent you can't believe your child is dead. You just keep asking over and over, 'What happened?'"

MONTANA

Former Detective Sergeant Judith Dunn Heilmann, 63, has seen firsthand the trauma of gun violence. "The effects are huge on first responders and

survivors," she says. "Sirens, yellow police tape, fire-works—anything can be a trigger—and suddenly all the memories that were in the background come rushing to the surface. Sometimes you don't realize how traumatized a child is until you find them hiding underneath a bed."

TENNESSEE

"We raised DaVontae that if you see somebody with a gun, you get away," says his aunt Amelia Griswold, 60. But DaVontae Ziegler, 15, didn't know that his 11-year-old neighbor had found a loaded gun. On March 6, 2015, Ziegler was shoveling his driveway when the younger boy accidentally shot him. "I think to myself, *If I had come home early, my baby would be alive. If it hadn't snowed, my baby would still be alive.* If we hadn't moved to that neighborhood, my baby would be alive. You think of every scenario," says Griswold, who'd raised Ziegler since he was 6 weeks old. Once shy, she now speaks in front of thousands advocating for gun safety. "I know my baby; this is what he would have wanted me to do."

ARIZONA

Tyler Parker was 15 when his older sister Lindsay, 19, a new mother, was killed in a drive-by shooting on December 3, 2006. "She was an awesome mom," he says. "Her being murdered was the last thing we expected." Parker's parents adopted their granddaughter. "Every time I see her," he says, "I think of Lindsay."

NEW JERSEY

As a social worker, Latania Robinson counsels ex-offenders in Newark, a city with one of the highest homicide rates in the country. The violence has a chilling effect on the people Robinson, 41, sees every day. "They don't know how to connect their feelings to a dead body on the ground," she says. "I'll ask, 'What do you feel?' And they say, 'Nothing.' They aren't even aware that the trauma has affected how they think, what they feel and how they behave."

Texas

The tragedy shocked the nation: On June 15, 2015, a lone gunman opened fire in Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The Reverend Sharon Risher's mother, Ethel Lance, 70, and cousins Susie Jackson, 87, and Tywanza Sanders, 26, were murdered, along with six others. "The screams that came out of my body when I found out were like those I've heard as a chaplain working in the ER [in Texas]," says Risher, 58, a vocal member of Everytown Survivor Network. "As long as there is an opportunity for someone to get a gun with the intent to harm, we are not safe," she says. "None of us are safe. We have to make a change." □

Jeannine Amber (@jamberstar) profiled Ciara in the May 2016 issue of ESSENCE.

"Name has been changed to protect subject's identity."

The survivors in these pages are sharing their stories to remind you that the epidemic rages on. The time to act is now. For more information about how you can get involved, visit EverytownForGunSafety.com at everytown.org.