

"A Conversation about Guns"

Community Comment
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We've started hearings in Congress on the issue of guns. There are more guns in the United States than there are Americans. There is no doubt in my mind that guns won't go away anytime soon. In responsible hands, guns are a tool. For a soldier or a police officer, a firearm provides both a tool for his or her defense as well as a compelling reason to obey the order of the person with authority. Especially in our communities where we strive to live within the context of a civilized society and accepted law, we freely give this authority to highly trained and well prepared individuals.

Since the Sandy Hook school shootings of twenty small children at their school, the conversation about why these things happen has gotten serious. WE need to have this conversation, we need it to be civil and serious, and we need to try to come up with some solutions that might work.

What I think will not work is arming any teacher that wants to be trained in gun use. This is ridiculous on face value. Being trained how to use a gun is not the same as being trained when to use it. A police officer is trained in the situations he may face and the psychological toll that using the weapon may cause. Very well trained officers have misused this lethal weapon. Many officers have used it just as they should have and cannot work as an officer again. We already put too much on teachers.

We could put armed guards in every school. Really? Just begin to add up the cost. Do we pay the cost of a well trained person? Do we pay a low wage to a rent-a-cop? We don't even have enough teachers.

So what can we do? We could restrict high volume military type guns. We could demand and enforce universal background checks. We could make owners responsible for the use of their gun. There may be ideas out there we haven't thought about yet. With a civil conversation maybe we could come up with truly good ideas. But we have to want to try.

My son-in-law asked me this; you've been around a long time. Does this problem seem different at this time? My perception is that it is different. When President Kennedy was assassinated, we were shocked as a Nation. But the feeling was that this was a lone event aimed at a person we knew was at risk because of the power and influence he had. A few

years later, in rapid order, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were killed. This time it seemed the world had gone mad. It seemed our culture had shifted. One could take a gun, not a knife or our fists, and kill. The gun made this possible.

But whatever we do about guns, it may help reduce the likelihood of another slaughter of five and six year olds. When you compare deaths by guns to any other country, it seems crystal clear we have to work on the very fabric of our culture.

This issue will not be easily solved. But Americans have seldom shied away from difficult issues. This is no time to start.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.