

Wear Orange
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, June 4, 2023
Carol Suboleski, Lisa Winkler, Amélie Harris-McGeehan

Introduction

Rev Margret A. O'Neill

Today we celebrate National Gun Violence Awareness Day and Wear Orange Weekend, honoring survivors of gun violence and recommitting our efforts to bring an end to the destructive power of violence in our society.

This morning, you will hear reflections from three members of our UUCCH Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, who also work closely with our statewide coalition of UU congregations, UU Faith Action NJ, and with the national and state efforts of Moms Demand Action, a grassroots movement of Americans fighting for public safety measures that can protect people from gun violence.

I also want to acknowledge that gun violence prevention is an intense subject, and it can be triggering for some people. We recognize both the necessity to speak out clearly on this topic, and the potential for pain or harm it might cause for some among us. You are welcome to take care of yourself if this is a difficult topic for you; we trust that you will make the best judgment to meet your needs.

Carol Suboleski offers the first of three reflections, sharing her thoughts on her experience as an elementary school teacher in these challenging times. Carol.

Why I Wear Orange

Carol Suboleski

Bong, bong, bong. . . “This is a lockdown.”, came a stern voice from our classroom speaker. I glanced at the nervous faces of my third graders as I hurried to lock the door and grab my emergency folder. The boys and girls scampered to the corner and began to whisper. “Is this a drill?” I heard one ask. “No talking,” I urged. “We need to be silent.”

Time ticked by while thoughts raced through my mind. Is this the real thing? I wondered. No lockdowns were scheduled for today. Please let it be a surprise drill! I pleaded inwardly.

Nothing bad could happen here in Marlton, I assured myself. Or could it? Was that what the teachers had thought on that awful day in Sandy Hook? Was anywhere ‘safe’?

All my life I wanted to be a teacher. Children are my favorite kind of people, and I’ve always loved to be with them. Teaching third grade had been my dream. Now I wanted to protect these little ones in my care, but how could I do that in this scary new world? How could I prevent my dream from becoming a nightmare?

At the beginning of the school year, our class had practiced lockdowns. “The point of a lockdown is to hide,” I told them. “Make yourself as small as possible and be sure that no one can see you from a door or window. If you are in the bathroom, stand on the toilet so that no one can see your feet.”

The boys and girls gaped at me. “Why?” they asked. “What could happen if someone sees us?” This stumped me. How could I explain the danger without terrifying them? “Just in case

something bad happens,” I sputtered vaguely. This didn’t really satisfy them, but I couldn’t tell them about mass shootings, could I?

One of the boys raised his hand and asked, “How do we hide in the cafeteria? ‘Good question’, I thought. There are floor length windows all around the lunchroom. The builders had put them in to make it a bright and cheery place. But was it also a death trap?

“They’re bulletproof,” I lied to comfort him, only realizing my mistake after I said it. Good job not scaring them. What has bullets? GUNS! Quickly, I changed the subject.

In the years that I had been a teacher, schools had changed from warm, open, welcoming places to cold fortresses with locked doors and lockdown drills. Is the problem really the fact that schools have too many doors, or is it the over 400 million, many of which are unregulated, guns in America?

Laws make a difference and can protect us. That is why I wear orange today. I want the US to become a place with common sense gun laws. I feel very fortunate to live in New Jersey. We have some of the strongest gun laws in our country. But states can’t do it alone. Most of the guns involved in crimes in NJ come from states that don’t have these laws.

Let’s pledge today to work to change that. We need national laws to protect us. Together we can elect gunsense candidates and make everyone safer!

Gun Violence Prevention

Lisa Winkler

Thank you, Carol. I am going to talk about three cold, hard facts that separate us from our peer nations and make America exceptional - in a shocking way.

#1 We have more guns per capita than any other nation on earth; 120 guns for every 100 citizens. We exceed the next closest nations in gun ownership by almost a factor of two. Here’s another statistic that I find frightening: one in twenty U.S. citizens own an assault weapon.

After the assault weapons ban was allowed to expire in 2004, assault weapon ownership proliferated. And do you know when gun sales really took off? Following the Sandy Hook massacre when gun owners logically believed gun sales of assault weapons would be restricted. These gun purchases give Americans easy access to guns.

#2 Another fact about gun deaths in America: Suicides make up almost 54% of gun related deaths. Why would that be? Well, guns are nearly always lethal (85-90%) in a suicide. Yes, there are other ways, but those are less lethal, and we know that many times those who do attempt suicide and survive, never go on to attempt it again. But with a gun, there are few second chances. Again, easy access to guns.

#3 Guns are the leading cause of death for children and teens in America. We are by far the worst when compared to other countries. Our death rate for those under 19 is 5.6 per 100,000. The next closest of our peer nations is Canada at 0.8. It is seven times more deadly to be a child in America than Canada. And the way our children die is horrific. Not by unintentional shootings where children find a loaded gun, not by suicide, though that is on the rise, but by homicide. As tragic as children dying by gun is, it is even more horrific that they are dying by homicide. Again, easy access to guns.

As Carol mentioned, we are lucky to live in a safe state like New Jersey. Our gun ownership rate is the lowest in the nation at 8.5%, we have the lowest suicide by gun rate at 1.9 per 100,000, and the fourth lowest overall gun death rate at 4.8. For comparison, Pennsylvania has a gun ownership rate of 40.7%, gun death rate is 13.1 per 100,000 residents, 6.9 suicide rate. Our concealed carry laws that required “Justified Need” for a carry license also made NJ safer. Only about 1000 citizens in NJ had Concealed Carry licenses. That law has been struck down by the misguided Supreme Court Bruen Decision and currently the “Bruen Answer” bill enacted last December has been challenged and is winding its way through the courts.

The difference between NJ and other states with higher gun death rates - easy access to guns. We need federal laws to keep New Jerseyans safe. According to our state Attorney General, nearly 78% of guns used in a crime involving a gun come from outside of our state.

Humans are not well suited to handle lethal weapons. We get angry, we are fearful, we have big egos, we use guns as substitutes for power. We don’t have good control of our emotions. Easy access to guns makes regrettable, irreversible incidents so likely.

If guns made us safer, we would be the safest country on earth, not one of the worst.

There is cause for hope; the passage of the first federal restriction on guns in 30 years - the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022- happened last June. In 2022, over half of the gun sense candidates running for office, won, many times against incumbents. Polls show public sentiment is changing in favor of tougher gun laws. And Republicans are speaking out for gun violence prevention measures.

What can you do to make change?

- Join Gun Sense Action Network (GSAN) to make phone calls to other states where representatives do not support gun sense initiatives.
- Write your legislators for a federal ban on assault weapons, close background check loopholes and enact a federal Extreme Risk Protective Order. Use the QR code for a federal assault weapon ban we have at the table in the Commons area.
- Vote for gun sense candidates and help get out the vote. Stop voter suppression efforts. League of Women Voters is an excellent organization for doing that.
- Sponsor educational programs like Be SMART and Extreme Risk Protective Order training.

Stop by the table in the Commons to sign up to learn more ways you can help.

When I get discouraged, I think of this, 10 years ago, 25% of Democrats in Congress had an A rating from the NRA. Today none do. That’s progress. Change can happen.

Next up is Amelie McGeehan with another action to reduce gun violence.

Guns Into Garden Tools
Amélie Harris-McGeehan

Gun violence is a complex problem, and ending this epidemic will require a wide range of solutions. One such solution is the work being accomplished by the organization called RAWtools. Founder and Executive Director Mike Martin from Colorado Springs started RAWtools in 2013. Like the bronze sculpture created in the late 1950’s by Soviet sculptor Evgeniy Vuchetich called “Let Us Beat Swords Into Ploughshares,” RAWtools takes guns and upcycles them into garden tools, as well as jewelry and other artistic objects.

This can be therapeutic, especially for individuals effected by gun violence, who participate in the hammering process that eventually transforms the parts of a gun into a garden tool. This encourages the sharing of feelings and storytelling, and can be very helpful in coping with the deep trauma of grief and loss from experiencing gun violence.

The use of guns has gone from a perceived need, beginning with “the founding of the NRA in 1871, by a group of former Union Army officers dismayed that so many Northern soldiers, often poorly trained, had been scarcely capable of using their weapons”, and over time, guns have evolved into an object that many individuals in this country want to own, and desire to have.

If you go to RAWtools, you will see information about Mike Martin, Shane Claiborne, his wife Katie, and others who are dedicated to partnering with other organizations to host trainings and nonviolence workshops, focusing on restorative justice and mental health first aid. Their blacksmithing equipment is used not only to forge guns into garden tools, but they also do live demonstrations, which are powerful to witness. The garden tools and other items are for sale (irregularly) throughout the year, and especially in early Spring. These garden tools symbolize the cultivation of Justice. Imagine our world without guns!

I will close by showing you a very short video about Mike Martin and RAWtools, and then two items I recently purchased made at the RAWtools Guns to Garden tools shop in Philadelphia. Rich and I had the opportunity to see the blacksmith shop run by Shane and Katie, located in a part of Philadelphia, called Kensington. In choosing to be there, they hope to improve the neighborhood. It was an eye-opening experience! I purchased a garden trowel made by Shane, from a rifle barrel, using the stock for the handle, and a bracelet made by Katie (from the sight chamber of a rifle) I will have them with me after the service, in Fellowship Hall.

Closing

Rev Margret A. O’Neill

Thank you, Carol, Lisa and Amélie, Lynda and Helen, for organizing this service today, and we are grateful to you and all the other Task Force members for the dedication of this church’s Gun Violence Prevention Task Force and your collaboration with partners in the wider community. The work to change our culture and our laws to reduce gun violence in our nation is crucial and compelling. Each and all of us can make a difference, by using our voice and our vote, the work of our hands and hearts, to save lives and heal the divisions in our society.

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RAWtools.org

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