

Written Testimony of

**John F. Annoni**

**Camp Compass Academy (youth)**

**2 Million Bullets (adults)**

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Before the

**United States House of Representatives**

**Subcommittees on Federal Lands and Water, Power, and Oceans**

**May 20, 2015**

RE: The Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement Act or the "SHARE Act".

POSITION: **Support**

Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. My name is John Annoni. I am a full time educator in the Allentown School District. I have been teaching for twenty-six years. I currently am a sixth grade Science and Integrated Language Arts teacher. I am also the founder of Camp Compass Inc. a not for profit organization started in 1994. I have authored 2 books my first was an autobiography titled **From the Hood to Woods; The John Annoni Story** and recently **Beyond One Day; Camp Compass Academy's Framework for Fostering the Social and Academic Development of America's Youth.**

The issues that are the subject of today's hearing are ones that I have seriously contemplated. While I appreciate that reasonable minds can and do differ about the *policy* decisions, I would like to take this opportunity to respectfully share my opinion, background and hands on knowledge about the outdoors (specifically hunting, shooting and fishing) and the impact it has had on myself and youth that would be considered "nontraditional" in the scope of relevance

First, I'd like to familiarize you with my story and my efforts to help underserved youth by using hunting, fishing and shooting. This will confirm my support of the "SHARE Act."

My desire to connect city kids with nature is the result of my own difficult childhood. I'm an Allentown native, I was raised by my maternal grandparents, Mary and Henry Angelo Annoni, who lived in a modest home at Second and Linden streets.

My father, Frank Thorpe, was a heroin addict. The last time I saw him was when he overdosed and was found by police dead in a bathtub. I was called to identify the body.

I never had a dad. I got to see him a couple times in jail and saw him once or twice on the street.

My parents were never married. However, my mother, Patricia Annoni, was involved in a series of abusive relationships that made for some traumatic weekend stays at her home in the Hanover Acres housing project. During many of those visits, I simply took off and headed for the sanctuary of nearby woodlots, where I discovered peace among the trees and wildlife. That got me away from the abuse. It took me away from things that hurt me.

Other than my grandparents and a few uncles who taught me about hunting and took me fishing along public waterways, nature was one of the few positive influences in my young life. I had a good, personal relationship with the outdoors.

By the time I was in high school, I had developed a real passion for the outdoors using public land. Hunting and fishing provided an escape that many around him sought in drugs. It's hard to do drugs when you want to get up in the morning and hunt animals. How am I going to beat a white tail [if I'm high]?

After graduating from Dieruff High School in 1985, I attended Kutztown University and received a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1989. Living in Kutztown was my first extended stay in a rural area, and I enjoyed the opportunity to do more hunting and exploring on the large State Game Lands of Berks County

After graduating from Kutztown, I returned home and took a job as a fourth-grade teacher at Central Elementary and now I'm a 6<sup>th</sup> grade Teacher at Trexler Middle School. The school district has changed since I started and some current data about it is cited below.

- The Allentown School District is a large, urban public school district located in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, in the United States. The District is one of the 500 public school districts of Pennsylvania. Serving most of the city of Allentown, it is the third largest school district in Pennsylvania, with 17,962 students, with 15.7% White, 17.4% Black, 64.4% Hispanic, 1.4% Asian, 0.17% Native American (1)
- Minority enrollment is 87% of the student body (majority Hispanic), which is more than the state average of 30%. (2)
- Families denoted as Low Income: 88.7% (2)
- Percentage of students receiving Free/Reduced Lunch: 86.8% (2)
- School Digger ranks Allentown City School District 450<sup>th</sup> of 462 Pennsylvania school districts. (3)
- **Size & Student/Teacher Ratio**  
The average number of students for middle schools in Pennsylvania is 475, so Trexler Middle School is **very large**. The student to teacher ratio is 36:1, which is significantly higher than the average for all U.S. middle schools (16:1) and significantly higher than the average for middle schools in Pennsylvania (15:1). (4)

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(1)[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allentown\\_School\\_District](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allentown_School_District)

(2)[http://www.publicschoolreview.com/school\\_ov/school\\_id/68412](http://www.publicschoolreview.com/school_ov/school_id/68412)

(3)<http://www.schooldigger.com/go/PA/schools/0228004929/school.aspx>

(4)<http://public-schools.startclass.com/1/75882/Trexler-Middle-School>

## Camp Compass Academy

Beginning in 1994 with some of my classroom students, I started developing conservation curriculum and using it after school. The student's response was strong and over time my enrichment program grew into a federally recognized 501c3 organization called Camp Compass Academy.

Camp Compass is a unified effort introducing urban students in grades six through twelve to various outdoor activities. During the sessions students are introduced and networked to numerous community businesses and working role models. The consequence is an educated population understanding selected careers, conservation, sportsmen's philosophies and their activities.

This project reaches and molds inner city students by providing them with hands on experiences and lessons designed to broaden their knowledge of the outdoors and its industrial aspects. To accomplish this goal informative lessons are provided with language rich and hands on activities. While participating in outdoor experiences students are involved in integrated and adapted Language Arts, Science, Social studies and Mathematics curriculum to enhance their learning. The imprinting of this incremented program dispels the many myths about sportsmen and conservation. It allows the students to use their discretion when passing judgment upon various conservation issues.

Camp Compass is unique because it also permits students to spend time with teachers outside of school and its normal hours. Second, the students are held accountable for their behaviors both inside and outside of school. Next, in some cases this program has become a surrogate activity provider for many single parent and non-conservation minded households. Finally, it guides students to becoming valuable members of society through mentoring.

Currently, this unique effort runs in five stages (termed the 5 E's; Exposure, Exploration, Extension, Effective Application and Example Mentoring) with each stage filtering deserving students into the next level. All Levels have special adapted academic curriculum to enhance Camp Compass's educational and outdoor agenda.

The typical members of the Camp Compass Academy start in the sixth grade (11-12). During the time they are in the sixth grade, they spend 2 -1/2-hours each Monday after school with their mentors. During this first year, they take and pass a hunter-safety course. They are taught an academic curriculum around outdoor themes, and they have frequent trips set up to go on outdoor adventures. I and my team believe that an outdoor education should be more than taking children on a field trip, feeding them a hot dog and soda and then having no more exposure with the child. We wanted the Camp Compass Academy to grow with the child over numbers of years. Without strong parental influences at home to counter-balance the pressures exerted by the gangs and peer pressure, our youth are in danger of being lost forever. This is the time in their lives when they most need something positive to build their self-esteem. CCA offers youth and their parents/guardians a safe, nurturing alternative to gang membership. We offer a program that will engage them in appealing outdoor activities and teach them that they can be successful in this world. Their parents/guardians feel secure knowing that their youth are

being well-supervised and provided with pertinent life lessons that will help them succeed and that they are kept focused and engaged in a way that will discourage gang and addiction involvement. Our goal is to inspire our youth to seek, and achieve, a better life.

The program's philosophy goes "BEYOND ONE DAY" at an event, in the woods or on the water, and it has given students a new outlook on conservation, sportspeople philosophies, and life. I founded a program that links different cultures, ages and socioeconomic groups to ensure that our country's great outdoor sports heritage continues to progress into the future.

### **A. Specific Program Goals**

The specific CCA program goals are cited below.

- Continue to help students in urban underserved areas develop both culturally, socially and academically
- Allow interaction between youth, adults and businesses beyond the traditional classroom.
- Integrate adaptive Science, Math, Social Studies and English into outdoor sports and conservation activities.
- Develop character and self-esteem through student-centered learning.
- Build bridges between cultures, ages and socioeconomic status.
- Demonstrate conservation practices and environmental respect through outdoor sports with an emphasis on hunting and shooting.
- Promote a positive connection with the community.
- Offers community job links and student references.
- Take a proactive approach toward firearm safety and education.
- Give outdoor sports, with an emphasis on hunting and shooting, a chance to expand its clientele

### **2 Million Bullets**

I always knew that there was a bigger picture we needed to see, and it took a divine moment after a tragic incident for it to appear. One of the saddest events in my life was when one of the students I was very close to was murdered. How I grieved for that young man. I kept thinking how much I wished I could be the bullet that took his life—then I could have redirected my path to an inanimate object towards something that didn't matter. That was the momentum behind the 2 Million Bullets Campaign. I thought that if we could find two million like-minded people willing to stand up for youth, we could serve multitudes of young people across America with our proven programs. We could help them stay off the streets, avoid the influence of drugs and gangs, and develop into the productive young adults we knew they could be through outdoor education and outdoor pursuits.

Through the pain of that loss, and with some guidance from above, we have developed a major awareness campaign. The orange ribbon is the symbol of that campaign. A ribbon in society shows you care about something. The mission of 2MB serves a dual purpose: First, We proudly wear our orange ribbons to create awareness. When people see them they often open a dialogue about the symbol. This gives us a great opportunity to explain

our passion for caring for youth through the hunting and shooting culture. Second it give adults that hunt, shoot and fish the chance to show America's youth that they care about them in solidarity. We recently started a petition to have the orange ribbon officially recognized as the color for caring about all kinds of youth in the outdoors.

**I'm here to support "The bill that clearly reaffirms that fishing, hunting, and shooting are important and traditional activities that should continue on public lands."** I'd like to declare a special emphasis on Title VI.

**Title VI: Recreational Fishing and Hunting Heritage and Opportunities Act -**

Recreational Fishing and Hunting Heritage and Opportunities Act - Declares that recreational fishing and hunting are environmentally acceptable and beneficial activities that occur and can be provided on public lands and waters without adverse effects on other uses or users.


It requires the heads of federal public land management agencies to exercise their discretion in a manner that supports and facilitates hunting, recreational fishing, and recreational shooting opportunities, to the extent authorized under applicable law.

It's clear that as a minority I do not fit the typical sportsman. I am a person that came into hunting "nontraditionally." However, I would not be the man I am today without participating in America's Outdoor traditions. Hunting and shooting saved my life. Being able to have access saved my life. Having access to hunt, fish and shoot will continue to change and save lives through my work and the work of others. I speak from hands on experience. I have lived through my own personal changes and have seen (first-hand) hundreds of youth be altered through the before mentioned outlets. I don't own land, I don't have extra money to buy it. Because of opportunities on public land I am able to compete with Mother Nature and so are my students. We are able to protect her and take a first-hand interest as consumers. Without being able to hunt, fish and shoot the disservice to America's outdoor heritage and sound conservation practices would be the demise of not only the animals and flora residing on our lands but the most important "critters" on the face of our earth - our children.

The "SHARE ACT" is a step in the right direction to allowing our outdoor heritage a chance to flourish not only within traditional households that participate but with others the heritage so badly needs. It will permit current and more importantly future participants the right to pursue interests that will have conservation, economic and social impacts that will ultimately frame millions of lives. I am before you as living proof of that impact.

Thank you for your attention and consideration of my testimony and once again it has been a privilege testifying before this Committee.

Sincerely,



John F. Annoni

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