

Testimony of Shirley Watral

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Thank you, Congressman Biggs, Ranking Member Congresswoman Jackson-Lee, and Committee Members for the opportunity to appear before you today and share my personal story.

This quote, by an unknown author, sums up my journey and why I am here today.

“One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you went through and it will be someone else’s survival guide.” — Unknown

I am a strong supporter of the Second Amendment, and gun ownership by responsible Americans. I am honored to be a voice for millions of women who share my beliefs and are not represented in mainstream media or are squelched on social media.

I am a survivor of domestic violence, author of *Heels to Holster*, firearms instructor and Florida State Director for Women for Gun Rights. None of these things were on my bucket list or my radar while growing up.

For 35 years, I was your average female who worked hard to become a successful business woman. I was raised on a farm in northwest Pennsylvania in an environment without firearms or family violence. I was neither for nor against the possession of guns. I built a career and a life I was proud of and I felt safe. Safety was never an issue for me because I thought “IT” would never happen to me. Then a man, who once said he loved me, turned violent, kidnapped me, and tortured me for 15 hours. I thought I was going to die that day.

Attempts I made to escape were met with beatings. I was no match for his size and strength. I was forced to stay seated or kneeling on the floor of the master bedroom. As the hours went by, I found no way out. I thought my salvation came when he brought out a gun and set it on the bed. Hours prior to this, no one heard my screams or came to my rescue. I saw the gun as my way to freedom. I could either use it to defend myself or get a shot off that the neighbors would hear.

Lack of knowledge of the fundamentals of a firearm were a disadvantage for me. My only goal was to get to the gun and press the trigger. I lunged for it and pressed the trigger to only hear myself screaming. It was like having the wind knocked out of me. The gun did not go off. I had lost my freedom in the blink of an eye, and now I lost my will to fight to regain it. I was defeated. I told him I give up and will do whatever he wants. He must have believed he had won and had control over me, so he let me go.

After surviving the beating, the biting, the whiplash from being thrown around by my hair, I took actions I believed would keep me safe. The restraining order I got did not stop him from contacting me and stalking me. I moved into a gated community, which did not stop him from gaining access and finding out where I lived. These things did nothing more than give me a false sense of security, just like gun-free zones and gun control laws. They are an illusion of safety.

He fought the restraining order and become so desperate he started planning ways to kill me. He made sure he had an alibi and looked for someone else to commit the murder. If you were to look for a silver lining in this cloud this would be it; thank God one of the people he approached was an informant for the sheriff's office. He wanted the informant to buy plastic explosives and have a detonator created. His plan was to blow up my car with me in it.

There was no warning his behavior would escalate to this point and once he decided he wanted me dead there was no law that would have stopped him.

The sheriff's office investigation took months to complete. Even though the sheriff's office knew his plan I did not feel safe. What if he found someone else to buy explosives from without the police knowing. I was terrified to start my car. Each step from unlocking the car door, to putting the key in the ignition, to starting the engine and putting it in gear, I was wondering, would this be my last breath.

After the sheriff's office gathered enough evidence, he was arrested. During the trial proceedings, I had to relive everything. Even though he was convicted and sentenced to jail time; I still did not feel safe. I was afraid he would find someone else to kill me. I was always looking over my shoulder. Planning for my future was spent on worrying about what he would do when he was released.

Physical wounds of domestic violence eventually heal. The invisible scars and never-ending threats, which can only be felt by victims, control their lives. I escaped being a prisoner in his house that night, but I was still a hostage of fear. Driven by fear I was terrified to leave my house and afraid to live my life.

Domestic violence is a worldwide epidemic of physical and mental abuse between individuals who know each other. Domestic violence knows no boundaries. It doesn't matter where you live, what you do for a living, your sex, race, religion, age or financial status. It is a topic many do not want to discuss.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence statistics show 1 in 4 women will be severely physically abused by an intimate partner at some time in their life. Millions of women are trying to reclaim their life after living through terrorizing times like mine.

Stories, similar to mine, are happening daily. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence statistics show on average, 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year this equates to more than 10 million women and men.

I get frustrated when I see prosecutors reduce or drop charges, and judges give minimal sentences and put repeat offenders on the street making communities unsafe. Within the legal system self-defense is shifting in favor of the criminal. We need to hold people accountable for the laws they break, which are already on the books, before passing

additional laws effecting responsible Americans. More gun control laws will not stop anyone who has killing and destruction in their heart.

You are protected by men and women armed with firearms every day. What about ordinary Americans who don't have the luxury of having someone with them carrying a gun to protect us? You enjoy the comfort of being safe when you are surrounded by armed men and women. I have experienced feeling safe and it was nothing more than an illusion. I know the difference between a sense of security versus real security. The difference is me being able to defend myself with a firearm.

For over 30 years, several major cities have adopted the strictest gun control policies across the country. If gun control laws were the answer cities like Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles would be the safest cities in America. Based on years of evidence it is apparent these policies do not work. Knowing average citizens are less capable of defending themselves, criminals are emboldened, crime soars, communities are less safe. These cities are examples of how gun control policies are a failure. Gun control policies combined with defunding the police are especially dangerous, causing overall crime and homicides to skyrocket.

Killers prefer gun-free zones and limitations such as magazine capacity. The criminal mind doesn't care how many laws they break. Their focus is on finding a place with the least amount of resistance and where they can cause the most death and destruction. Crime Research Organization statistics show 94% of mass public shootings have happened in gun-free zone from 1950 to March 27, 2023. If we take away all the statistics of the various groups there is one thing I believe we can agree on. The mental state of the people carrying out the killings are the problem. Let's work together to find a way to address this issue. We need to stop looking for a quick feel-good approach. Let's work together and look into the dark side of the mental state of people wanting to harm others just like that of my abuser.

Studies done to characterize abusers and mass killers show a number of similarities.

People who behave abusively -

- Have difficulty tolerating having their feelings hurt without retaliation.
- They feel entitled to not be hurt or embarrassed and will punish anyone who violates their entitlement.
- The empathy they imagine, when they walk in the shoes of another, is one of the person wanting to cause them harm.
- Accountability is not an issue for them. They believe the world says it is okay to hurt others when they are hurt.

- There is usually childhood trauma. They have lived in homes where they witnessed abuse or were abused themselves. This abusive behavior seems normal to them.

People who want to inflict death -

- Blaming society for their rejection and harbor a strong desire for notoriety.
- They want to make their mark on the world which will elevate them to the status they believe they are entitled to and deserve.
- The belief in nothing and that there is no purpose other than an impulse to destroy (nihilists).
- They do not believe they will be held accountable for their actions. Continued defunding of law enforcement and lack of holding criminals accountable for their actions, when being prosecuted, feed into this feeling.
- Many have prior history of violence and criminal records.

When we start breaking the cycle of what causes a person to be abusive, we may also be addressing why someone would want to inflict death onto others.

If you ask what would have stopped any mass killing, it would be being confronted with equal force. If you have ever called 911, you know it can feel like a lifetime for them to answer, let alone how long it takes them to arrive. With the defunding of law enforcement, the response time in some areas is longer than the national average and can feel like eternity when your life is at stake. I hope no one is ever in the position where they have to defend themselves or their loved ones. If they do I hope they are prepared. I encourage people to seek training in all disciplines, such as unarmed, stop the bleed, situational awareness, and firearms. Ordinary citizens are safer when they have tools to defend themselves. I own and carry a firearm to protect a life, my life, not to take a life. My life is worth protecting.

I started to claim my life back when I exercised my Second Amendment God given right and went to my first firearms class. I walked into the classroom confused, scared, and intimidated. I walked out with new found feelings of strength, courage, and confidence. I learned the fundamentals of how a firearms functions and the safety rules. Knowledge is power. That class changed my life. It was reflected in the people I associated with, how I communicated with others, and how I physically presented myself. These are things that cannot be accounted for in any statistical format. They can only be seen by others. Criminals look for people who appear to be submissive, not going to put up a fight, and go quietly. If I walk with confidence, look people in the eye, and I am aware of my surroundings, I am less likely to be a target. The difference between a victim and a survivor is how you face life. This is when I started my journey from victim to survivor.

I stopped being defined by that tragic event in my life and started finding a way to inspire other domestic violence victims to claim their life back. I want to give them hope and strength to become the warrior for their life.

If you want to help domestic violence victims, encourage them to prepare to defend themselves. Stop telling them they are not capable of handling a firearm, and scaring them with skewed statistics that only demoralizes them. Fund programs that offer training and arm the women.

As a firearms instructor I have introduced many people to firearms training. My passion is working with women and watching them experience the same amazing transformation I did after my first class. When they realize they can protect themselves with a firearm their demeanor changes to one of confidence and courage.

Gun control groups voice the possibility if a woman has a gun in a violent situation, it will be taken and used against her. That is a possibility. What is more probable is that she will be overpowered by a man based only on his strength. I need a tool to be my equalizer to defend myself, and I choose a firearm. I want it to be my choice, not that of the government. I want to be my own protector.

American gun owners recognize we are up against well organized, well-funded effort, assisted by the mainstream media, creating campaigns to demonize guns and gun owners. Politicians, media and school boards are painting gun owners as domestic terrorists and creating an agenda to discriminate against them. We are being targeted and discriminated against politically, financially, and socially. Our country is being divided into two groups, the bullied and the bullies. People have lost respect for one another and for life. In some cases, people cheer the deaths of those who disagree with them. This division is devastating to our country. We are not the enemy.

Statistics presented by the Center for Disease Control, estimated over one million times a year a civilian used a firearm to defend themselves. Today this statistic is no longer public knowledge or allowed to be used by Second Amendment advocates. Whether you choose to use this statistic or not I ask, "Are those lives saved defending themselves with a firearm worth as much as the lives that have been taken by criminal homicide?"

We need to address these forgotten American who needed to use their firearm to save their life or the lives of their family. They are victims too, they had to defend themselves against assault and/or attempted murder. Americans who choose to carry a firearm do so to their life, not take a life. Their life is worth protecting.

The emotional repercussions a person feels when they must take the life of another human being to protect themselves must be devastating. Millions of people use a firearm to defend themselves and yet I never hear of programs to help them deal with the emotional consequences. We need to help them and provide programs for these

survivors too. Their life was important enough for them to defend it and it is important enough to for us to support them and help them.

It is time to put aside any personal goals and face the hard truth of what is causing people to become criminals and killers and use guns to commit the most serious of crimes. We need to work together and dig up the ugly truth of what is causing our youth to turn to a life of crime and disrespect to authority. It won't be easy and it won't be quick. I believe it will prove to be effective and improve community safety.

The American people see the violence. They see the police being undermined and defunded by the same people pushing for more gun control. They see the criminal justice system being lenient and almost sanctioning the violence. They are realizing no one is coming to save them. They have been buying firearms at a record pace over the past two years. Gun control policies like red flag laws, gun-free zones, and safe storage are not keeping people safe and people want to be able to protect themselves and those they love.

As a victim of domestic violence, the Red Flag law does not give me a feeling of safety. It is just the opposite. I worry my abuser or anyone being vindictive can disarm me and take away my ability to protect myself. The American legal system was designed and built on the presumption of innocence and to a fair and public trial. Giving anyone the power to disarm me without cause, without being identified to me, and without a public trial first does not fit the description of our American legal system.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, inexperienced politicians talk passionately about firearms and present inaccurate information. Don't look for an easy solution to violence in our communities. Stay away from "feel good" laws that do nothing to secure safety. Get down into the cause of mass killings. Look into the mental state of these criminals and killers and find out what we can do to keep others from following them into killing and destruction. Firearms are not the problem, people are. Stop looking at the illusion of doing something by disarming responsible Americans.

One of the things that has changed more than guns in the past hundred years is the way adults and youth communicate. Due to the internet and electronics, there is little face to face socializing. There are no longer discussions on disagreements, only bullying. Video games start conditioning our youth for violent acts. How firearms function has not changed, society has.

Don't be taken in by the media and their description of a firearm. The American citizens put you in the position you hold and expect you to do your due diligence and learn about the things you are voting for or against. Don't be swayed by gun control groups which are funded by large sums of money, and go along with their definitions/descriptions of firearms and accessories.

I am tired of women who are not knowledgeable on firearms demand legislators restrict our constitutional rights. The Constitution guarantees the government will not infringe on

the right to keep and bear arms, and will not support any laws designed to restrict or infringe on my God given right. In 2022 women became the fastest demographic of gun owners. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimate in 2021, 33.2% of first-time gun buyers were female.

Women for Gun Rights and the firearms industry believe safety and education are key to decreasing deaths with guns and safer communities. There are a number of programs which are independently developed community education and safety programs. The list below is just a few examples.

The Hunter's Education program - This program has proven to lower the number of firearms accidents/fatalities exponentially. When Colorado implemented hunter's education, fatal accidents were cut in half, and non-fatal accidents have substantially decreased and are the lowest to date. The decrease in accident rates continues to drop, proving this program saves lives.

<https://cpw.state.co.us/learn/Pages/HE-Safe-Hunting.aspx>

https://www.hunter-ed.com/colorado/studyGuide/Why-Hunter-Education/20300601_165341/

The Kid SAFE (Safety Around Firearms Education) - Kid SAFE focuses on all children, not just hunters. The program originated in Oregon and is proceeding to go nationwide. It is imperative we reach children in urban areas with a higher mortality rate and children with English as a second language. Firearms safety should be treated similar to water safety. Every child in the country should be trained in firearms safety. This would eliminate the mystery of guns and provide the understanding they need to be handled carefully and with respect to life. Zero firearms accidents is the only acceptable goal. Let's endorse programs like this, which teach our youth safety, discipline, and respect for firearms at all ages.

<https://kidssafefoundation.org/about/>

FASTER Saves Lives - This is a school security program created by concerned parents, law enforcement, and nationally recognized safety and medical experts. FASTER is a nonprofit program giving educators practical violence response training. They believe it is imperative to allow teachers and administrators to respond quickly and effectively. Personnel armed and properly trained on scene will turn schools into "no victim zones". The FASTER Saves Lives program is open to and applicable to schools, churches, businesses, and the public. Their classes include firearms training, general crisis, emergency management and trauma medical training. Everything which will make schools, churches and communities safer.

<https://fastersaveslives.org/about-us/>

National Train a Teacher Day is held annually. Instructors across the country offer free firearms safety training to teachers, school administrators, and employees.

<https://nationaltrainateacherday.com/index.html>

Suicide programs - A number of programs are backed by the firearms community to address suicides, which make up 50% of gun deaths. Hold My Guns, Walk the Talk America, Rachel's Challenge, Active Heroes, Mission 22 are a few among the long list. National Shooting Sports Foundation partners with the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention to provide resources and support to firearms retailers and ranges.

I accepted the position of Florida state director for Women for Gun Rights to help preserve our Second Amendment for future generations. Women for Gun Rights is a non-partisan group of amazing women from all across the United States, from all demographics. Our members include active and retired law enforcement officers, retired military, rape victims, domestic violence victims, former anti-gunners, firearms instructors, and women who have lost loved ones to gun-free zones and gang violence. We are raising awareness that education is the key to firearms safety and violence prevention. A number of our members have a story, like the victims of recent mass killings, of unspeakable violence against themselves or lost loved ones.

If you have any questions about a certain type of gun or how it functions, Women for Gun Rights are offering their services to educate you. There is purposely misleading information out there. We are available to sit with you and clarify any questions you may have and if you want to actually see a gun or fire a gun, we will be there for you. We will teach you the rules of firearm safety and fundamentals of handling a gun safely. People fear what they do not understand. Let Women for Gun Rights educate you on firearms.

Help me and countless other women like me have the opportunity to protect ourselves with a firearm if we choose. The Second Amendment is vital to me and them. It made a difference in my life and how I live each day. We need to help victims of domestic violence, and preserve our Second Amendment for future generations. We need to stop penalizes responsible Americans and punish the killers, and criminals that are making our communities dangerous.

I would like to sum up my report with a quote from an unknown author.

“Survivor Psalm: I have been victimized. I was in a fight that was not a fair fight. I did not ask for the fight. I lost. There is no shame in losing such fights. I have reached the stage of survivor and am no longer a slave of victim status. I look back with sadness rather than hate. I look forward with hope rather than despair. I may never forget, but I need not constantly remember. I was a victim. I am a survivor.” — Unknown

I am honored and thankful to be here representing millions of female gun owners and the organization Women for Gun Rights, as the Florida State Director.

<https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS>

<https://crimeresearch.org/2023/03/updated-information-on-mass-public-shootings/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgrIsuO5PLc>

<https://www.thehotline.org/identify-abuse/why-do-people-abuse/#:~:text=Some%20people%20witness%20it%20in,also%20could%20choose%20not%20to>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hurt-people-hurt-people/201510/five-reasons-people-abuse-their-partners>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/through-the-social-science-lens/202305/what-do-we-really-know-about-mass-shootings>