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2024 Essay Contest \$250 Scholarship Award Winner

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*The Day It All Went To Heller*

It's hard to put my finger on the first time I understood what a gun was. My grandparents had guns around their home, rifles in a glass case and a BB handgun on the front porch, crusted in pollen. My elementary school security officer, carrying a gun holstered with those clasps I used to enjoy hearing pop open. My friend's stepdad, picking me up for a sleepover, left a fully loaded handgun on the console. That was the moment. I picked it up - "just there, harmless" - and felt the weight of its power for the first time in my 10-year-old palm. After that, guns were everywhere I looked. Ads on billboards, urging "Protect your family for half off regular price!" While all I could think of were my classmates' confused faces during our first lockdown without a "drill" attached.

As I grew older, I began to understand more and more about how little the government cared about the risks that all these guns pose to our country's children and youth. I saw on the news the protestors marching in the streets, begging for the government to provide some protection from our armed fellow citizens; and I saw the lack of any significant response from the elected officials that those very same protestors had put in office. I always wonder if anything would have been different if I had joined the protestors or if I would have just shared their disappointment in addition to my own hopelessness. But I learned that the constitutional obstacles to effective gun control had been put in place by our Supreme Court before I was big enough to march in a protest or sign my name on a petition: *District of Columbia v. Heller*, June 26, 2008. And I wasn't even old enough to drive when, in 2020, gunshot wounds became the number one cause of death for American youth.

Maybe I became complacent. So used to even local governments giving up on controlling guns that I gave up on seeing how reality could even be different. Everyone I know has similar experiences. I'm one of the lucky ones, really, not

having lost family members or friends in the name of “American Freedom.” Who cares about a societal price tag when some men wrote an awkward sentence 219 years ago about the need for a “well regulated militia,” a sentence that five other men would dust off in 2008 and claim it to mean that it was A-okay for almost anyone in our country to own a gun? Who cares that this week, I experienced my fifth lockdown with no “drill” attached?

But then I left the United States. For just a couple of weeks, my feet were not planted on American soil. To call it a breath of fresh air is an understatement. There was no security guard, hand on sheathed gun, standing, watching students enter schools. Why would there be? There were no signs barring people from bringing guns into stores, because why would someone have a gun? Even the police seemed lighter, not bogged down with the responsibility of possibly killing the people they were meant to protect if someone in the crowd pulled out a concealed weapon. There was a lightness in my chest, in every step, that I had never experienced before.

When in the world would it be decided that the freedom to own a gun would stand in the way of our right to live? Easy. June 26, 2008. The day it all went to *Heller*.