



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2024 Essay Contest Second Place Winner - \$2,500 Scholarship Award

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The Freedom to Live

A normal day of sixth grade is permanently ingrained in my memory: Valentine's Day, 2018. Mrs. Springer, my English teacher, walked in late to class with tears streaming down her face. She told us that there had been a shooting at a high school in Florida, and many students had been harmed. This was the only time I ever saw Mrs. Springer without a smile; she tearfully reflected that schools should be a safe space, where our only concern is learning.

Of course, Parkland was far from the first school shooting during my lifetime, but it was the first one that I was old enough to truly comprehend. I've never felt safe in school in the same way since then, especially when the fire alarm goes off. I feel an instant sort of panic: the students at Parkland High School had no way of knowing that it wasn't a drill, but instead an intruder aiming to take their lives before they even really began.

Guns have invaded my safe space in visible and invisible ways, from ALICE drills to the immediate panic at the sound of a crash in the hallway. I feel personally touched by debate on gun laws, even as far removed as Congress and the Supreme Court, because their decisions truly impact my life. This impact sparked my inquiry into the role of guns in America and the Second Amendment. As I explored internet rabbit holes, I realized that the Supreme Court's 2008 *Heller* decision is an intimate reflection of the twisted nature of the priorities of a sector of Americans. After reading the full decision, I was shocked by its magnitude: essentially, it prevents even state and local governments from implementing gun laws that have been proven to save lives in other high-income nations. Coming from a conservative state where many of my neighbors own guns, I had never learned about *Heller* in school, and discussions about guns were framed around the Second Amendment granting Americans "freedom." To that I say, what use is the freedom to own a firearm if our children do not have the freedom to live?

The rate of high schoolers killed by firearms is 82 times higher in the United States than other similarly democratic and economically prosperous nations. These nations have implemented measures that limit gun ownership, which is impossible in our country as

long as the *Heller* decision and its progeny stand as precedents. For our lives and the lives of the students who follow us, I firmly believe that it is our duty to stop allowing older generations to treat our lives as dispensable. As my generation - the generation of endless school shooter drills and empty promises from our legislators - comes of age, our voices will hold tremendous collective pressure, so long as we recognize our own collective power and our own responsibility to use that power to demand definitive measures to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence. America is in a crisis, and the remedy is the courage of our generation to stand up and confront the twisted precedents that put a higher value on our country's guns than the lives of our country's children and youth.