



Americans Against Gun Violence  
7862 Winding Way #151  
Fair Oaks, CA 95628  
(916) 668-4160  
aagunv.org / info@aagunv.org

2025 Essay Contest Third Place Co-Winner

\$2,000 Scholarship Award

Leah Laku

North Forney High School, Forney, Texas

### **The Sound My Body Remembers**

Where I'm from, bullets mean war.

In South Sudan, I learned their sound before I knew my letters. I watched them transform marketplaces into graveyards and schoolyards into battlefields. Before I came to America, I believed I was leaving that violence behind. I was wrong.

The first time I heard gunshots in my American neighborhood, my body remembered what my mind tried to forget. I dropped to the ground, heart pounding against concrete. My classmates stared, not understanding that what was background noise to them was the soundtrack of my nightmares.

Justice William O. Douglas's words in *Adams v. Williams* struck me with force: "There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police." Reading this from a Supreme Court Justice shattered my assumption that America's gun violence was as unquestionable as its flag. In South Sudan, weapons proliferated during civil war. Here, they multiply by choice, protected by a powerful lobby that speaks of rights while ignoring wrongs.

The Second Amendment begins with "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State," yet this crucial context vanishes in debates. In my homeland, I witnessed what happens when weapons flow freely, communities destroyed, childhoods stolen, development paralyzed. America's founders understood militia service as collective defense, not individual arsenals that claim the lives of more American children each year than many diseases combined.

After surviving conflict in South Sudan, I find America's gun statistics baffling. Other developed nations respond to gun violence with decisive legislation and cultural shifts. Japan experiences fewer gun deaths in a year than America does in a day. This is not inevitable; it is a choice. My new classmates practice active shooter drills with routine indifference. They don't know what comes after, the wailing mothers, the tiny coffins, the communities that never recover. I know. When we crouch in darkened classrooms, I'm not pretending. My memories supply what the drill lacks: the metallic smell of blood, the desperate prayers, the silence when someone stops breathing.

The gun lobby speaks of protection, but I question: Who was protected when my cousin died in crossfire walking home from school in Juba? Who is protected when American children die in similar circumstances? Not the victims. Not the traumatized survivors. Only the profits of gun manufacturers and their political allies.

I came to America seeking safety and opportunity. I found both shadowed by familiar violence. My journey gives me perspective few American-born students possess. It also gives me purpose. We who have witnessed war's reality must speak truth to those who romanticize weapons without understanding their consequences.

Where I'm from, we know that freedom without security is vulnerability with a noble name. The bullets that killed my neighbors in South Sudan and those that threaten my classmates here create the same holes in communities and hearts. And I refuse to let them mean nothing.