



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest

\$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

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Some “Downs” Are Avoidable

Alex Schachter was fourteen when he died at his desk on February 14, 2018. A talented trombonist who had just earned a spot in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School band, Alex spent his final evening completing an essay on World War II tank battles. In his notebook was a poem: "Life is like a roller coaster, it has some ups and downs... it may be hard to breathe but you just have to push through..." Alex never got the chance to push through. The AR-15 that ended his life was purchased legally, in accordance with Florida's reputation for "respecting Second Amendment rights."

Throughout my education, I've been taught that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual's unquestionable right to firearms. Yet Justice William O. Douglas's 1972 opinion in *Adams v. Williams* reveals a striking disconnect between history and modern interpretation. He wrote of a "powerful lobby" that "dins into the ears of our citizenry that these gun purchases are constitutional rights," a force that has paralyzed meaningful legislation for decades.

My research revealed a shocking truth: what I'd been taught was revisionist history. The Second Amendment's 27 words begin with a crucial qualifier: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State..." The framers included this language deliberately, understanding the right existed within the context of maintaining state militias. In 2008, the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* broke with centuries of precedent by declaring for the first time that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to own a gun unconnected to militia service. Before then, the Court consistently upheld the collective right interpretation, as in the unanimous 1939 *United States v. Miller* decision stating the Amendment must be interpreted with its militia clause in mind.

The consequences of the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment are

measured in lives. Americans aged 15-19 are 82 times more likely to die from gun homicide than peers in other high-income countries. My generation experiences a uniquely American trauma: 95% of public schools conduct active shooter drills. As a five-year-old, I practiced hiding silently with my fellow kindergartners in darkened classrooms, thinking it was a game. As a high school student, I've seen the tourniquet kit that my chemistry teacher keeps beside her desk in the naive hope that she can use it to save a wounded student from bleeding to death from a gunshot wound.

Justice Douglas boldly asserted "There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police," challenging what we now accept as constitutional gospel. His opinion acknowledges what Great Britain proved after the 1996 Dunblane Primary School massacre: comprehensive gun regulations, including complete bans of civilian ownership of all handguns and all automatic and semi-automatic long guns, prevent mass shootings without destroying democratic freedoms.

Young Americans like me stand at a critical juncture as both victims and future policymakers. We see what adults often miss: constitutional rights exist in balance. The Declaration of Independence lists "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as "unalienable rights," in that order. Life comes first because without it, no other rights matter.

The Framers never intended for the Second Amendment to overshadow our most fundamental right: the right of children to return home from school alive. Alex's poem described life's "ups and downs" as inevitable, but students getting gunned down in their classrooms never should be.