



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

2026 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Winner

Naomi Peck

Lincoln High School, Portland, Oregon

The Bullet Is Still There

“The thought of having armed guards and lockdown drills never crossed our minds.” That statement feels distant from the reality I have grown up in, where gun violence is not an abstract issue, but something that has shaped my entire life and my family. The last time I saw my dad walk, I was three years old. I do not remember it. When I was four, he was shot and paralyzed by a felon with a weapon, a member of a white supremacist gang. My dad was Mexican American. That moment changed everything. Hospital visits replaced playdates and his hugs came from a wheelchair.

For the next eight years, I grew up helping care for him. I administered medications, helped him get from point a to point b and sat beside him through long days shaped by pain and complications that never fully healed. He lived with a bullet still lodged in his body. Bedsores and infections became part of our reality. Gun violence did not end the day he was shot. It continued every day after, in ways that were slow, painful, and invisible to most people.

When I was twelve, I sat beside him in hospice as his breathing slowed. He died from injuries that his body could never recover from and I lay across his chest. His death was not treated like a headline or a statistic, but it came from the same place. A gun. A moment of violence that extended across nearly a decade.

I do not have the privilege of imagining a world untouched by gun violence. I have grown up in a world where schools prepare for it, where lockdown drills are normal and where the threat of violence is something we are taught to anticipate. But I have also seen the deeper impact, the way gun violence fractures families, prolongs suffering and creates losses that unfold over time.

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Dr. Michael North's statement reflects a world where children were protected from this fear. I believe we should not accept a reality where armed guards and drills are normal parts of growing up. Safety should not come from preparing for violence, but from preventing it. My experience has taught me that gun violence is not only about the moment a trigger is pulled. It is about what happens after. It is about the years of pain, the caregiving, the loss, and the absence that follows. We should not have to build our lives around the expectation of violence. We should build a world where moments like the one that changed my life never happen at all.