

The cousins of our friend

A plea for better gun laws

BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

We are at the Lloyd Athletic Club, and the conversation turns to new gun legislation introduced in the Oregon Senate, when one of the people in our group speaks up: "Four of my own cousins were shot to death."

That gets our attention.

This turns out to be a story that unfolded over two decades, involving four different shootings, the victims all from different branches of the family.

And the guns? Not one of them should ever have been in the hands of the shooters in the first place. Not even the NRA would argue with that.

The .357-caliber revolver had been stolen, along with a camera, from the home of a family for whom James Dean Parker had done some remodeling work. Two months later, he carried that gun to a popular Portland bar and music venue on Southeast Belmont where, by previous arrangement, his half-sister unlocked the door for him after closing time, in the early hours of March 21, 1995. In the course of stealing the \$500 that lay in the till, he shot and killed the 32-year-old beverage manager who had almost finished cleaning up for the night. She was the mother of two young children – and a cousin of our friend.

The .25-caliber pistol had a homemade silencer that Robert James Acremant had made himself. He told Medford police that he'd had it for years, but only recently came up with the idea of killing someone. On Dec. 4, 1995, he used it to abduct two women, ages 42 and 53, who ran a Medford property management firm, thinking to

hold them hostage while cashing their checks. Instead, he shot them each twice in the head. Acremant has schizophrenia. The younger of the two victims was a cousin of our friend.

The Smith & Wesson .357-caliber revolver was identified as the source of the stray bullet that shot down Southwest Salmon Street, from Broadway to Second Avenue, and instantly killed a man who was walking hand-in-hand with his wife that June 1997 evening. Five blocks west of the couple, 18-year-old Daniel DeJesus, in a scuffle with rival gang members, had snatched that gun from his buddy's pocket and fired wildly. He was granted a sentence reduction, thanks to the generosity of the young widow, who refused to model a vengeful spirit to her young children. Yet she was broken-hearted at the loss of her beloved spouse, who was a cousin of our friend.

The short-barreled rifle was used execution style by Uriah Michael Dean McKinley, who was loaded on methamphetamine when he shot a former employer in the head on Dec. 2, 2013, having heard the man had come into some money. The victim, age 30, lived in Silverton and was a cousin of our friend.

Communities work together to eliminate exposure to lead and asbestos, and automobile companies routinely issue safety recalls for everything from desiccated air bag inflators to faulty brakes. We are a society that cares about safety, especially if a product, instrument or substance might threaten a life.

In 1978, a child died from choking on a toy firing missile, and Mattel took its Battlestar Galactica Colonial Viper off the

market. Just this Easter, Target recalled over half a million Hatch & Grow toys that, if ingested, could expand inside a child's body and cause intestinal obstructions.

Why then, whenever gun control laws are proposed, do we hear an argument that goes something like: "With such a glut of firearms already on the street, there is no point in trying to regulate gun sales now." Why accept this fatalism?

It's true there is a glut: According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the number of guns manufactured in the U.S. each year has recently almost doubled, from nearly 5.5 million in 2010 to nearly 10.9 million in 2013. Yes, the 300 million guns in this country – and these figures don't count guns bought by the U.S. military – have become an enormous scourge.

But we would never take a fatalistic attitude toward salmonella in food, drunken drivers on the road, or the current spike in heroin sales. And we won't reduce gun deaths if we shrug our shoulders and walk away.

A gun is a deadly threat to the public when it is in the wrong hands. We need laws that provide better controls over who gets their hands on one.

Portland writer Martha Gies owns a Tula 1931 Russian Nagant that her father brought home from Europe after World War II. Although it is a seven-shot revolver chambered for a proprietary cartridge that would today have to be handmade, she took the extra precaution of having the firing pin removed years ago, just in case the gun ever fell into the hands of an addict, a thief or someone suffering from mental illness.