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Where are the adults?

By ERIC A. HOWALD

I'm fine, I tell myself while following an employee of the Salem-Keizer School District through the currently empty halls of Whiteaker Middle School in the minutes before students plan to walk out of class and join a nationwide protest and memorial for 17 teenagers and adults who were gunned down at a Florida high school.

It's March 14, 2018, one month to the day after the last, devastating mass shooting at a school in America.

My daughter, Ameya, is a student here and planned to take part in what was happening. She told my wife and I that she wanted to be part of the walkout a week ago, neither of us said anything at the time. Two days earlier, I asked her to sit down and tell us why she wanted to participate.

"It could have been my friends," Ameya said, and started retreating into herself as if on defense.

That was enough, I told her. I would support her, but she needed to understand that what she planned to do was a political act and not just an excuse to leave school for a few minutes against the wishes of adults.

I don't know how often average parents worry about safety at school, but it is an ever-present, low-level concern in my life. If this violence arrives in Keizer, I will need to be on the front lines of it talking with survivors and the families of victims. I've worked with and around the students of this community for more than a decade. If a single student ends up dead on a Keizer campus, there is a better-than-average chance I might know them, or one of their siblings, or their parents, or maybe their best friend. I'm nearly certain it's only a matter of time.

I'm fine, I repeat to myself as the students make their way out the classroom to the exits. Then I see who is leading this particular group of students: Paris, an eighth grader at the Whiteaker. Paris and one of her co-organizers lead the group down the hall. When the students falling in line behind her start to get louder than they should, Paris tries to hush them.

Paris and Ameya have attended the same school since first grade. Seeing the confidence and surety evident in her leading of this group makes me feel pride in the young woman she is becoming.

Then a wave of shame rolls in as she passes. In eighth grade students are 13 or 14 years old while adults in this country have chosen to do nothing for a generation after each and every mass shooting — at schools, workplaces, malls, clubs and churches. We've throw up our hands and contend there is simply nothing we can do because a document written more than two centuries ago says gun ownership of nearly any type is a right bestowed upon anyone older than 18. We've come up with all manner of defenses for the continued use of deadly force, but the last time I checked there was no asterisk by the Christian commandment "Thou shall not kill."

It's okay, I'm fine, I tell myself as I follow the students outside into the parking lot where they gather in a large mass. I continue to take pictures as what looks to be about a third of the school files out the doors. Some students have signs with the names of the victims from the Florida shooting. The ones who are obviously just there to miss out on class group together at the back and talk in outdoor voices. The ones nearer the front stand and whisper quietly waiting to see what happens.

Paris picks up a megaphone and launches into reading names and descriptions of the lives that were snuffed out in Florida. I learn later that she and the other organizers read through the obituaries and social media feeds of all 17 victims to compile brief biographies. She makes it through four or five names before her voice cracks for the first time. Tears follow soon after handing off the megaphone.

The megaphone passes from the next young woman to yet another that I know and was at my house as recently as a few months ago. From her it goes to the fourth student, Alysya. Martin Duque Anguiano, 14 at the

time of his death last month in Florida, was her cousin.

Last summer, I drove Ameya, Alysya and another friend up to Portland so they could see Shawn Mendes perform at the Moda Center. They were aware that a concert represented a potential danger to their lives and asked me whether they should be worried. This was only two months after an Ariana Grande concert in the

United Kingdom became the stage for a suicide bomber. I did my best to reassure them but, in retrospect, the weight of the question escaped me at the time.

At what point did we agree to trade our children's sense of safety as they make their way through the world for the "right" of some people to choose to carry assault-style weapons? We vote on lesser trade-offs every year.

I am certain some who are reading this are already picking apart the last lines. They're going to write to me and tell me how little I understand about guns because I didn't use the right terminology. I don't care. I first fired a rifle at a pie tin when I was 13. A few years later, my uncle took me out to hunt squirrels and I thrilled over shooting and killing my first one. Seven years later, the third person in my life killed himself with a gun, he was 13. I haven't held a gun since and don't intend to ever again. At any rate, this isn't an issue of vocabulary, it's about human lives.

I finish talking with Alysya and get Paris' attention for a quick interview before she heads back inside. Before Paris is able to make it over to me, Ameya comes up from behind, hugs me and begins weeping.

This. Is not. Fine, I think. I free my arm from Ameya's hug and put it around her shoulder and pull her in tight. Alysya sees her distress and comes over to both of us as tears begin to stream down my cheeks.

"I'm just glad it wasn't one of you guys," Ameya says between sobs.

"I'm glad it wasn't you, too," Alysya says.

How do you explain survivor's guilt to someone in eighth grade?

Before I know it, I have an arm around both of them and I tell them, the way adults always do, that we are going to make this better. The girls recover and walk away without another word. I'm left feeling like a fraud in a puddle of my own lies and wiping away the streaks on my face.

If I was one of the kids today, I would be disgusted with the idea of growing old. There are things that could be done to limit the volumes of blood in our streets — background checks on every gun sale, mandatory liability insurance for gun owners, increasing the age for gun purchases and, yes, better systems for engaging those who with struggle mental health problems — but adults choose to look the other way or resign ourselves to wishes of the well-armed militias. We raise our hackles for a brief span of time or hashtag a tweet and pretend we've done our hard part in the struggle until the next mass slaughter when we put off talking about solutions because that would be "a knee-jerk reaction."

How can we expect the children of this country not to become cynics when the adults refuse to speak truth to monied interests? Silence begets helplessness begets hopelessness, and I know that isn't the lesson I want my daughter and her friends to learn.

The problem is where to start. I can give money and my vote to candidates who tell me they will fight for gun control, but I don't expect that to make a difference. We tell people every vote on a ballot matters, but the reality is that the vote you cast with your dollar matters more in this country.

How many parents have to lose children before anything actually changes? How many size small body bags will we let pile up in the meantime?

We shouldn't be fine with asking either question. But, in the 48 hours since the walkout, the only conclusion I've come to is that we're all fine, until we're not, and the toll for our inaction is being levied on our sons and daughters.

(Eric A. Howald is managing editor of the Keizertimes.)

moments
of
lucidity



Tough talk on guns gives way to reality

By DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

During a February White House discussion on school safety, President Donald Trump singled out Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., for not including a provision to raise the legal age to buy a long gun from 18 to 21 in a bill the senator had sponsored. "You know why?" Trump schooled Toomey, "because you're afraid of the NRA, right?"

Last week, Trump saw his own words thrown back at him after the White House released a list of actions to improve school safety that does not include raising the legal age to purchase a long gun—a measure opposed by the National Rifle Association.

Trump had signaled his willingness to consider an increase in the age for legal purchases of long guns in response to the mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida, high school that left 17 dead. Such a rule could have prevented the 19-year-old shooter from buying the AR-15 he turned on students and teachers.

Instead, the White House action sheet calls for a federal commission on school safety to be chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos that will make recommendations in a number of areas, including "age restrictions for certain firearm purchases."

But the action sheet did not indicate a specific age, such as 21, or stipulate which firearms a different age would apply to.

The administration also pledged to help states pay for firearms training for teachers and reiterated its call to improve the background check and mental health systems. However, the White

House did not include the language from Toomey's 2013 bill to expand background checks for gun shows and online sales.

Democrats were quick to pounce on Trump's apparent retreat.

"After signaling ... (that) he would be for raising the age of purchase for assault weapons from 18 to 21, a modest measure, President Trump backed off—saying he would leave it to the states and the courts to decide," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer railed.

"That's a cop-out, and we know that," he added. "After indicating support for universal background checks, President Trump makes no mention of closing the dangerous gun show loophole or internet sales loophole."

A Sunday night tweet showed Trump moving away from his February statements: "On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)."

Asked if there is anything in the action plan that the NRA does not like, White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders responded that an age-limit increase is on the list of ideas that "will be reviewed" to see if they are best done on a federal or a state-by-state basis.

Sanders also told reporters that Trump "hasn't backed away from these things at all." Instead, the White House is "focused on things that (they) can do immediately."

On March 9, Florida Gov. Rick Scott signed a bill that raised the le-

gal age to buy a long gun in the state to 21, banned bump stock devices and extended the three-day waiting period for gun purchases to include long guns. It also would allow some teachers to carry guns.

"Today should serve as an example to the entire country that government can—and must—move fast," Scott said.

The NRA filed a lawsuit against Florida that same day. "Florida's ban is an affront to the Second Amendment, as it totally eviscerates the right of law-abiding adults between the ages of 18 and 21 to keep and bear arms," the NRA said in a statement.

The day before the meeting with Toomey and other lawmakers, Trump told a group he had lunch with top NRA officials. "If (the NRA is) not with you, we have to fight them every once in a while," he said. "That's OK."

The legal age of purchase is not as clear-cut as the recent debate suggests. Individuals ages 18–20 may purchase rifles and shotguns from a federally licensed firearms dealer, but not handguns. It also is legal for individuals ages 18–20 to possess handguns and long guns and to purchase them from unlicensed dealers.

"The only thing you cannot do at age 18 is purchase a handgun from an FFL," or federal firearms licensed dealer, noted Ken Klukowski, an attorney with the American Civil Rights Union who used to work for the NRA.

Klukowski said he thinks Trump instinctively supports the Second Amendment, but he "starts a public discussion by just expressing out loud his initial thoughts on a matter" — thoughts that in past White Houses "would be run through layers of vetting before anything was laid publicly." (Creators Syndicate)

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Do ads make teens drive recklessly?

At what age does the human brain mature?

Under most laws, young people are recognized as adults at the age of 18. However, emerging science about human brain development informs that most people do not reach full maturity until the age of 25. During their

first two decades of life, humans are readily influenced and highly impressionable.

Fairness in assessing the growth and development of interests among young American men has held many among them attentive to and fixated on automobiles. Nowadays, this opinion writer would argue, there are often as many young American women also quite interested in automobiles. The use of the automobile by many young men and women is to attract persons of the opposite sex.

Aside from human nature and the birds and bees, one of the ways America's young people are effective at shortening their lives is by using the automobile in ways as to test the limits of physics and related control of powerful machines. I was taught to drive by my father who offered many admonishments from my beginner stage to solo use of the family car. It was then my turn with my daughters. I never had an accident but that outcome was a case of pure luck and, while my daughters returned home —once each— with minor damage to family cars, but no loss of life, it's a hunch good luck also smiled their way.

So, let's get right down to brass tacks regarding kids and cars. The reader may be transfixed on the idea that their little darling is gentleman- or lady-like behind the wheel of any

auto he or she drives, family car or kid-owned. However, almost every friend of mine back in time was just a bit, mind you, inclined to show off or test limits with near misses or actual fender benders as outcomes. The worst instance from my teenage years was the death of a best friend who

was not driving but riding in a car going too fast to negotiate a corner. That accident resulted in a head-on crash that cost him his life, as well as two other teens and the mother in the other car.

Nowadays, factor-in modern day television advertising. Recently, there was one during the Super Bowl by Chrysler-Fiat applauding the ability of their Jeep Wrangler to ford a stream at high speed, tearing up the creek bed, with possible roll over into water deep enough to drown anyone knocked unconscious by the impact. Bad form for a commercial millions of young Americans watched during the Super Bowl. Meanwhile, the same company, Chrysler-Fiat, offers a TV ad where a caravan of six Challenger and six Charger cars drive at top speed on a twisty, narrow, curvy mountain highway with steep cliffs on both sides. Are they nuts?

Not wishing to unduly criticize one car company, there are more examples of this sort of throwing caution to roadside winds among several current TV commercials for new cars exemplified by Honda, Land Rover and several others. In fact, it's unlikely the average TV viewer will get through an evening's viewing without seeing one or more of them. And, of course, no one needs a graduate degree in psychology to conclude that the younger set are seeing these ads and being in-

fluenced to try the same feats of death and life-long injury caused by them.

Again, the human brain commonly does not fully mature until our species is in his and her mid-twenties. Regarding car advertising: why don't the car manufacturers devote their profits to making commercials that don't encourage speeding and irresponsible behaviors. Rather, how about using as a template from the latest Alfa Romeo ad where two cars spin their wheels on an ice rink and turn thereby to display their attractive lines. Safety features on modern cars are also nothing to sneeze at.

Most of our allies do much better than we do at establishing and maintaining community-like living conditions. Instead of looking so often to how much money can be made by selling products, it would do the American population better to consider how well we can serve each other, especially, in the matter under consideration here, the children and youth of our fellow American citizens.

Shared responsibility for the welfare of every American would likely decrease the violence in the U.S. It would predictably also advertise products and services that show and vouchsafe their value and importance for transportation when used sanely and without harm not only for he who drives but as well for he who happens, in the instance of automobiles, is out there too and can be harmed by recklessness and negligence. Bottom line: If every American communicated his concern over advertising messages, change would come as it always has when more and more of us speak up on behalf of reforms. During our history, Americans have accomplish great things. Why not this?

(Gene H. McIntyre lives in Keizer.)

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