

# 'Let my DAUGHTER'S LEGACY



*It is the news we hear too often from across the Atlantic: a college shooting, a school atrocity, a gunman on the loose in a quiet community. We read the names of those who have died, separated from them by thousands of miles but joined to their grief by a common humanity. In October, President Barack Obama was enraged when eight students and a teacher died in a college shooting in Oregon. And watching as he addressed the nation was Sandy Phillips, whose own child was killed during an attack on a cinema in Aurora, Colorado. After this latest tragedy, GH spoke to Sandy about her gun law campaign.*

**THIS IS HER STORY...**

*'With her photo all over the news, she became the face of the tragedy, and more than 2,000 people came to pay their respects'*

**SANDY PHILLIPS**



With mass shootings of young people rarely **year alone**, GH investigates why the United States has a daughter and is now fighting for a better

**'E'**very time I hear on the news that there's been yet another shooting, I think of the families receiving the phone call that will shatter their world and I'm transported back to 20 July 2012 – the day a phone call shattered mine.

Perhaps I'm biased, but I always knew my daughter Jessi was a special soul. I often think of the Christmas carol concert she took part in when she was three years old. She sat on the side by the altar along with all her tiny friends, and when the teacher motioned, they were all supposed to stand and sing the song they had rehearsed. When the time came, Jessi was the only one to stand. But unperturbed, she sang all alone, at the top of her voice. When she finished, the whole church burst into laughter and applause – and her face was beaming with pride.

Of course, when Jessi became a teenager, there were times when I had to stop her from doing exactly what she wanted, and she would tell me she hated me. We would sit at our kitchen table, and I would tell her, 'I am not your best friend, I'm your mother. We can become best friends when you're an adult.' I kept my word. When she grew up, she'd tell her friends that I was her best friend, and I'd say the same to mine.

Jessi dreamed of becoming a sports broadcaster, and when she told me she wanted to study sports journalism in Denver, Colorado – a two-hour flight from our home in Texas – I worried for her. She had grown into a stunning redhead, and I just wanted to keep her safe. But I'd tell her I was the mamma bird – that it was my job to make sure her wings were strong enough – and that she was ready to fly.

In July 2012, she moved into a new apartment, and we arranged that the following week I would come to help her settle in. Only I never did. On the evening of the 20th, a few days before I was due to leave, I sent Jessi a text to see what she was up to. She told me she was at a late-night screening of the new Batman film with one of her good friends, Brent. 'Go back to bed and get some sleep,' she wrote, before adding, 'Can't wait to see you Tuesday morning – I need my mamma.' Touched, I replied, 'I need my baby girl.'

Less than an hour later, my phone rang. When I saw Brent was calling, I remember feeling confused. Then I answered – and behind his soft voice I could hear screaming. He told me there had been a shooting, and when I asked if he was okay, he said he'd been shot twice. 'Where's Jessi?' I asked.

'I'm sorry... I tried,' he replied. I begged him to tell me she was alive, but the phone went dead. I would later discover that my daughter had been shot six times, that she was one of 12 people who had lost their life that night, and that a further 70 people had been wounded – some left in wheelchairs, some with other life-altering injuries.

## **THE UK:** *leading the way*

The UK has one of the most rigorous systems of gun control in the world. In 2013, 30 people were killed with guns, and offences made up just 0.2% of recorded crime.

Our laws were tightened after two devastating incidents: in 1988, semi-automatic weapons were banned after a gunman killed 16 people in Hungerford, Berkshire. And ownership of handguns

# be the end of America's gun shame'

out of the headlines and more than **10,000 US citizens killed by guns in the past** States of America refuses to lay down its firearms, and hears from a mother who lost future for her country...

The following days, weeks and months passed in a blur of shock, anger and grief. I do remember Jessi's funeral. I'd imagined an intimate service, attended by her closest friends and family. But with her photo all over the news, she became the face of the tragedy, and more than 2,000 people came to pay their respects.

My husband, Lonnie, and I attended every day of the gunman's trial and we got to know the families of the other victims. From those early conversations grew unshakeable friendships – all of us heartbroken members of a club that there's no resigning from.

The gunman – I refuse to grant him the infamy he wants by naming him – was given 12 life sentences, one for every life he took, and 3,318 years for the attempted murders of those he wounded. My grieving is constant – it had a start date, but there will be no expiration. I feel dread as the 20th nears each month and even the smell of popcorn – the last thing Jessi ate – makes me feel ill. Once, when I was walking along a pavement with my husband, a pretty redhead passed us wearing a green coat just like Jessi's. She even had the same clip-clop kind of walk. The pain was so unbearable that we held on to one another and Lonnie turned me around to face the wall until the girl was out of sight.

But through fighting for change, I've found something to cling to. Like many Americans, Lonnie and I had no idea how easy it is to buy guns and ammunition online. It was only after doing our own research that we discovered that the website that sold bullets to the man who murdered our daughter made no background checks whatsoever. Devastated, we sued – not for the money, but in the hope that it might bring about change. Incredibly, our case was dismissed. In the state of Colorado, any arms vendor has immunity from prosecution – it is the only industry protected in this way, and it is horrifying. Our fight has left us with legal costs of more than \$200,000 and we may have to declare ourselves bankrupt.

But though we might have lost this battle, we're still determined to win the war. We started Jessi's Message, which works with victims and survivors of gun violence across the country, and trains them how to campaign for change. We believe that there should be background checks on every single person buying a gun or ammunition in America, in every single state, and I hope that one day we will get there.

Until that day, I'll remember my daughter for the beautiful soul she was. Through our charity, the Jessica Redfield Foundation, we've given away three \$10,000 scholarships to young women studying sports journalism. I hope they'll go on to fulfil their dreams – because my daughter never got the chance.'



*'Somehow, this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response at this podium ends up being routine'*

**BARACK OBAMA**

## GUNS IN THE US

It was a crime that enraged the world's most powerful man. After eight students and a teacher died in a college shooting in Oregon last October, President Barack Obama took to the stage, his fury palpable, and described the US as 'the only advanced country on earth' to see such shootings every few months. 'Somehow this has become routine,' he said. 'The reporting is routine. My response at this podium ends up being routine. And what's become routine, of course, is the response of those people who oppose any kind of common sense gun legislation.'

For a cross-section of US citizens, owning a gun is synonymous with being an American. 'I'll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands,' said actor Charlton Heston at the 2000 National Rifle Association (NRA) convention, a phrase that has come to epitomise the gun-rights movement.

'We have a frontier culture in the US,' says Matt Bennett, a researcher from the American think tank Third Way. 'And part of that was the idea that a well-armed society was vital to the security of our people.' It was written into the oft-cited Second Amendment of the Constitution: 'the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed'.

With gun-ownership so deeply ingrained in the American psyche, will a change ever come? 'The changes will be generational,' says Mark Bryant of Gun Violence Archive. 'The NRA spends millions of dollars influencing votes. If we can reduce the money in politics so votes cannot be bought so easily, and challenge the expectation that every adult needs a gun, then things will start to change. But many more people will die before they do.'

was made illegal in the UK after the 1996 Dunblane massacre, in which 16 schoolchildren and a teacher died.

Today, there are just over 170,000 firearms licences

on issue in the UK, and trained officers assess the suitability of would-be licence holders on a case-by-case basis. In order to be approved for a licence, would-be gun

owners have to pass a police interview, a home visit and provide references. Anyone granted a licence is required, by law, to store their weapon securely, away from ammunition. □