



DROP YOUR WEAPONS

In the wake of America's deadliest mass shooting, *Alex Hannaford* meets the mother whose hashtag activism is breaking new ground in the entrenched battle for gun-law reform. She's already won over Starbucks and Facebook. Could Donald Trump be next?

The images flashing up on the screen are at once shocking and heartbreaking. In the age of social media, there are few filters; this is a visceral, real-time account of tragedy. Mobile-phone footage of police cars, their red and blue lights filling the night sky along with the “pop, pop” of gunfire; a Tweet from a survivor saying: “Shooting at Pulse. We hid in the bathroom. And we can’t find our friends.” Soon, he would discover that those friends, Juan Guerrero, 22, and Christopher “Drew” Leinonen, 32, had lost their lives in the massacre at the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, that ended with 49 people dead and more than 50 injured. Guerrero and Leinonen had been dating for two years and hoped to marry.

Then comes the inevitable timeline of events: the shooter’s identity is revealed; commentators clamour to offer possible motives; a sombre-looking President Obama delivers words that perhaps at one time might have brought comfort and conveyed hope for a solution to the epidemic of gun violence in America, but now offer neither. It’s the 18th time that he has had to speak to the nation following a mass shooting during his presidency. “We grieve the brutal murder — a horrific massacre — of dozens of innocent people,” he said, calling it “a further reminder of how easy it is for someone to get their hands on a weapon that lets them shoot people in a school, or in a house of worship, or a movie theater, or in a nightclub. And we have to decide if that’s the kind of country we want to be.”

In the days that follow, more details of the attack seep out. It took four minutes for Omar Mateen, 29, to kill most of his victims — about the same amount of time it would have taken him to fill in the single form required to legally purchase the AR-15 rifle he took into the club. “Engineered to deliver maximum carnage with extreme efficiency” is how the rifle had previously been



LOVE AND HATE A candlelit vigil in Orlando (left) after Omar Mateen (above) shot dead 49 people in a gay nightclub in the city

described in a lawsuit brought against one of its manufacturers. Mateen was able to buy it, along with a Glock 9mm handgun, from a local shooting centre just a few days before he carried out his attack — despite having been put on the FBI’s terrorist watch list while being investigated in 2013 for telling

91%

of attempts by suspected terrorists to buy guns in America between 2004 and 2014 were successful

SOURCE: US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

co-workers he was affiliated with terror groups, and again in 2014 for his links to a known suicide bomber.

For Shannon Watts, the sickening narrative is all too familiar. The 43-year-old mother of five (two step-daughters, two daughters and a son) is the founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America — a pressure group that attempts to persuade lawmakers, companies and educational institutions to establish gun reforms. “It’s an outrage,” she says. “It’s the 150th mass shooting in America since 2009 and Congress has done nothing, not passed a single law to try to prevent the next mass shooting in this country. The gun lobby have sat on their hands while more than 2,000 suspected terrorists have bought guns since 2004.”

In the days following the Orlando massacre, Moms Demand Action helped galvanise 36,000 people to call the Senate and demand change. Subsequently, a vote on new gun-control legislation was promised. Watts now believes the US is on the verge of a “sea change” in attitudes. Even the Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, veered from the party line to Tweet his support for closing the “terror gap”, ie stopping the sale of guns to suspected terrorists such as Mateen.

“I hope that Donald Trump can make some headway on this issue,” she says. “That said, Trump believes the solution to the Orlando shooting would have been to arm dancing, drinking patrons of a nightclub who were in the dark. That is what he thinks is the solution to our gun violence problem, so I’m not super-confident that he’s the champion we need.”

Today, Watts sits on the sofa in the apartment she rents with her husband, John, in Boulder, Colorado — a temporary move while the house they’re building in the mountains is finished. When she started Moms Demand Action 3½ years ago, she had no idea how it would take ➤➤➤

LEFT: CAMERA PRESS; RIGHT: POLARIS/EVYNE



CLASSROOM TERROR Police lead children from Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, where a gunman shot dead 20 children, six adults and himself

over her life. Launched from her kitchen table in 2010, the pressure group now has more than half a million “likes” on its Facebook page, with chapters in all 50 states. At the end of 2013 it joined forces with Mayors Against Illegal Guns (a nonprofit group started in 2006 by the New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg) to form Everytown For Gun Safety, the largest gun-violence prevention group in America.

While the Obama administration failed to deliver any meaningful change to gun-control laws prior to the Orlando massacre, Moms Demand Action has, in just a few years, lobbied major corporations into headline-making turnarounds on their gun policies.

In the summer of 2013, in response to gun-rights advocates holding a “Starbucks Appreciation Day” to thank the coffee-shop giant for letting customers carry weapons in its stores, the pressure group sponsored a nationwide boycott using the hashtag #SkipStarbucks. It worked. The following month the Starbucks chief executive, Howard Schultz, published an open letter saying its stores had been “thrust unwillingly into the middle of this debate” and that he respectfully requested customers “no longer bring firearms into our stores”. He clarified that, although it wasn’t an outright ban, the company wanted to give gun owners the chance to respect the request.

Since then, Moms Demand Action has used hashtag activism to force the fast-food chains Jack In The Box and Chipotle into asking customers not to bring firearms into their restaurants. The organisation has even taken on Facebook, the platform that facilitates its work. The social network had become one of the biggest marketplaces for guns until Moms Demand Action pointed out that private adverts were largely unregulated and that sellers often didn’t require background checks. With the hashtag #EndFacebookGunShows, in

January the organisation saw Facebook ban private gun sales on the site.

“It’s a huge win any time you can get businesses involved in this issue,” Watts tells me. “If we can get the CEO of an international company to come out and say guns are no longer welcome in their stores it sends a very strong cultural signal which way the country is moving.”

It was the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, that first spurred Watts to action. In December 2012, she was folding her laundry at home when shocking pictures began to emerge on her TV screen of children and teachers running from school buildings, each child instructed to place their hands on the shoulders of the one in front; of parents hugging each other, weeping uncontrollably, or screaming into their mobile phones behind the police cordon; of classroom windows riddled with bullet holes. She remembers thinking it couldn’t possibly be as bad as it looked. But she soon discovered it was worse than anyone could imagine: Adam Lanza, a troubled 20-year-old who had a fascination with mass shootings and an arsenal of weapons, fatally shot 20 first-graders, aged six or seven, and six staff members.

“Sandy Hook was sort of beyond human

comprehension,” Watts says, “and what made me so angry was that immediately afterwards came the calls for guns in schools and arming more people and loosening the gun laws we had.”

John came home to find his wife at her computer in the kitchen, trying to find a “guns equivalent” to the organisation Mothers Against Drunk Driving — but she wasn’t having any luck.

Back in the 1980s, Watts tells me, if a father got in his car drunk and ended up killing his family, people would say it was a horrible tragedy, but he shouldn’t be punished — that he’d suffered enough. “And then Mothers Against Drunk Driving came along and said, ‘Wait a minute, laws are the moral underpinning of society and without them this will keep happening.’ Well, they cut the numbers of drunk-driving fatalities almost in half.

“Flash forward to 2016,” she says, “and if I left a handgun right here on this coffee table and my son came in and shot himself or someone else with it, people would say, ‘What a horrible tragedy, but we can’t hold Shannon accountable, she’s suffered enough.’ Only 28 states in this country hold people accountable for not safely storing a firearm away from children.”

Unable to find what she was looking for on the internet, Watts decided to start her own campaign on Facebook. “Which is laughable,” she says, “because I had all of 75 ‘friends’ at the time — it wasn’t like I was a social-media phenomenon — but I felt like I had to do something, never imagining what it would become.”

After setting up her Facebook page she began getting calls from trademark lawyers, web designers and women wanting to establish chapters. Watts felt overwhelmed, but with an army of willing volunteers she watched the organisation grow overnight. “I think it says something about type-A mums who have jobs, children, and yet managed to find a way to carve out another 40 hours of their week to work on this. I was suddenly busier than I had ever been.”

Watts is keen to stress that she is not anti-gun *per se*. She grew up in rural upstate New York. Although her parents didn’t hunt, she was raised around children whose parents did. Back then, she says, guns were never a safety concern. She believes in the Second Amendment — the right of people to keep and bear arms — but wants caveats to it, including full background checks.

Under federal law, private sellers are not required to conduct a background check, ask for ID or record a sale — something known as the “background-check loophole”.

“If you look at states that have closed the background-check loophole you see suicide cut in half,” Watts says. “You see almost half the rate of domestic gun homicides, almost half the rate of police murders by guns, almost half the rate of mass shootings, and half the rate of trafficking.” ➤➤➤

ALL BUT ONE
major American city has had
a mass shooting since 2013

AUSTIN, TEXAS IS THE EXCEPTION. SOURCE: MASS SHOOTING TRACKER

To those who say her organisation does not go far enough, and that the Second Amendment should be scrapped completely, she says: “We have 300m guns in this country and a lot of responsible gun owners. Seventy-four per cent of NRA [National Rifle Association] members actually support closing the background-check loophole, so this is not an issue we’re in disagreement with — it’s one that extremists have commandeered. It’s about responsible gun owners standing up and saying, yes, we support gun ownership in this country, but that doesn’t mean you have to take your AK-47 to college with you; it doesn’t mean you need to have a handgun stuck in your pocket when you go shopping.”

Then there’s the politics of gun control. The NRA is considered by many to be the most powerful lobby group in the country, and claims to have 4.5m members. Gun advocates are far more likely to be single-issue voters and active political campaigners, so politicians are accused of pandering to them in order to secure votes. Watts says the gun lobby has run roughshod over America’s lawmaking bodies, and that lawmakers believe it’s perfectly OK to do their bidding.

Dave Cullen, the author of *Columbine*, an extensive examination of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in which two boys murdered 12 fellow students and a teacher, says that after each mass shooting there is a push for gun reform, but each time those voices peter out. “We’ve actually gone backwards.”

The Clinton administration introduced a 10-year ban on assault weapons in 1994, but nothing replaced it when it expired. “The Republican party has gone much farther to the right and the NRA continues to get more power,” Cullen says.

Despite political obstruction, Watts says that what Moms Demand Action has accomplished in 3½ years is nothing short of remarkable. “My kids think marriage equality happened overnight, but it was years and years of activists on the ground changing state laws, changing policy, and showing the Supreme Court and Congress which direction the nation was headed. I think the exact same thing will happen with guns.”

The record of the Obama administration illustrates the glacial pace of change. Obama has struggled to get any meaningful gun reform through a conservative, pro-Second Amendment Congress, despite overwhelming public support. So in January he went it alone, without Congressional approval, with executive actions. These included issuing guidance to limit the number of sellers who don’t make background checks; the FBI hiring 230 more people to help run those background checks; and measures to make it easier for

EIGHT

children and teens are killed by guns in the US every day

INFANTS TO AGE 19. SOURCE: MOMS DEMAND ACTION FOR GUN SENSE IN AMERICA

states to submit the mental-health records of potential gun buyers to the national background-check system.

The debate is now at the heart of the presidential battle. Despite Trump’s recent call to stop suspected terrorists buying guns, he courts the NRA closely. In May, the lobby group endorsed him as their preferred candidate. At their annual meeting, he told them that Hillary Clinton would take away the right to bear arms (she has never said that). “We’re not going to let that happen,” Trump said. “We’re going to preserve it, we’re going to cherish it.” He also claimed he would overturn President Barack Obama’s executive actions on guns and abolish so-called gun-free zones.

Just down the road from the NRA meeting in Kentucky, members of Moms Demand Action convened their own meeting to urge candidates and elected officials to “listen to the movement of Americans who reject the gun lobby’s extremist agenda”. They also unveiled a new hashtag: #MakeAmericaSafeAgain.

Watts’s very public persona has not come without its costs. She’s been subjected to intense vitriol online, death threats, threats of sexual violence, and even people parking outside her house to scare her. It doesn’t worry her, she says. “I think part of that is because of this idea that my children are in danger [from guns], so I really don’t have anything to lose. So bring it. Because while I’m figuring out how to make sure my children are going to get

home from school safely I’m pretty immune to getting bullied.”

A teacher once asked her son why his mother was trying to take away the Second Amendment, and one of her daughters was taunted by pro-gun kids at school. But Watts calls these incidents “blips”. “My children are armed with the facts, so they don’t suffer fools gladly,” she says.

Pam Mangas from Kentucky, a mother of three boys, joined Moms Demand Action shortly after the Sandy Hook massacre. She describes Watts as the bravest woman she knows. “When moms see she can stand up to tough adversaries, it gives us courage.”

Watts is still an unpaid volunteer within her organisation — an arrangement with which she says she’s happy. “This organisation needs to exist for decades, because even when we have wins we need to stick around and make sure the gun lobby doesn’t reverse them.”

She’s also joined Emerge Colorado, the local branch of a national organisation that trains women to run for public office. Since it became a state in 1876, Colorado hasn’t elected a single woman to the US Senate or as state governor. “There’s such a desperate need for female mayors and state lawmakers,” Watts says. “There are so many issues we need to have a say in and we just don’t.”

I ask if that’s her plan: to run for state office, or even if she has her sights set on Washington DC — that perhaps the only real chance of extensive and lasting gun reform will come if she is one of the people actually making the decisions? She pauses. “I’m not sure if that’s in my future or not. But I’m putting my toe in the water.”

Meanwhile, the parents of those killed by guns continue to try to get their voices heard in a country where an average of nearly eight children are shot dead every day. Nelba Márquez-Greene, the mother of Ana, a six-year-old girl who was killed at Sandy Hook, wrote an open letter to the parents of those slaughtered in Orlando. “I am so, so sorry... that our tragedy here in Sandy Hook wasn’t enough to save your loved ones... You will receive love from a million places. Embrace it,” she wrote. “Take good care of yourself. This will be a forever journey. Some ugly will come your way too. Delete. Ignore. Let it go.”

Post-Orlando, Watts says she is optimistic that change will eventually come. “I’m hopeful every time something like this happens in our nation. This is the same Congress that did not pass background checks after Sandy Hook. However, after Sandy Hook it actually took us four months to get a vote on background checks; after Orlando it took four days, so we are definitely seeing a sea change in gun politics in this country.” ■

See Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense going toe to toe with the NRA, at thesundaytimes.co.uk/shannonwatts



Shannon Watts, 43, founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America