

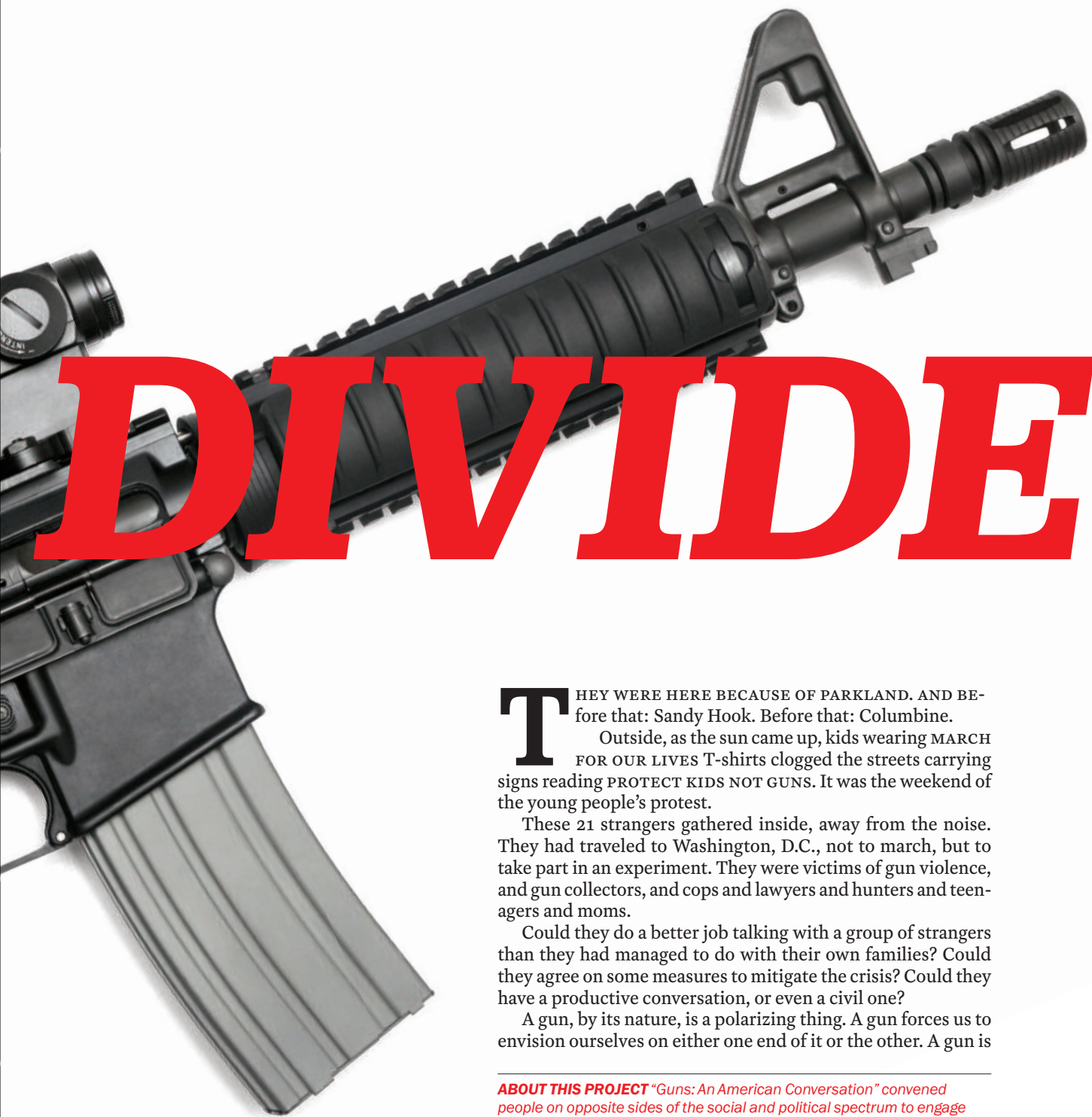
Nation

# THE GUN

On a warm spring day, 21 people—some who love their AR-15s, some who would never touch a firearm—gathered to look for middle ground in the life-or-death debate over gun control. Here's what they found out

**BY BEN MONTGOMERY,  
KELLEY BENHAM FRENCH  
AND THOMAS FRENCH**





**T**HEY WERE HERE BECAUSE OF PARKLAND. AND BEFORE THAT: Sandy Hook. Before that: Columbine.

Outside, as the sun came up, kids wearing MARCH FOR OUR LIVES T-shirts clogged the streets carrying signs reading PROTECT KIDS NOT GUNS. It was the weekend of the young people's protest.

These 21 strangers gathered inside, away from the noise. They had traveled to Washington, D.C., not to march, but to take part in an experiment. They were victims of gun violence, and gun collectors, and cops and lawyers and hunters and teenagers and moms.

Could they do a better job talking with a group of strangers than they had managed to do with their own families? Could they agree on some measures to mitigate the crisis? Could they have a productive conversation, or even a civil one?

A gun, by its nature, is a polarizing thing. A gun forces us to envision ourselves on either one end of it or the other. A gun is

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**ABOUT THIS PROJECT** "Guns: An American Conversation" convened people on opposite sides of the social and political spectrum to engage in a dialogue around the polarizing topic of guns. The project began with a workshop for 21 participants on March 24 and 25 at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., and expanded to 150 people who participated in a monthlong moderated Facebook group. It was launched by a coalition of American newsrooms owned by Advance Local, in partnership with the journalism organization Spaceship Media, Essential Partners and TIME. This article and a documentary video on the project are being published jointly in TIME and Advance news outlets across the U.S.

## VOICES FROM THE DEBATE



***'I didn't want to listen to other people's damn stories and their crying ... [but] there's a lot more to this.'***

ALEXIS INTILI,  
financial adviser  
from Staten Island



***'My question [for gun-rights advocates] is, What are you so afraid of? But that's offensive.'***

MATHILDE WIMBERLY,  
retired educator  
from Louisiana



***'I come from a long lineage of firearm owners. We believe in self-defense against white supremacists, being that most of my family live in rural locations.'***

LA'DANIEL BOYKIN,  
pest-control technician  
from Colorado



***'I did not change my feelings about guns, but I understood that good, smart people could feel differently.'***

HELENE  
COHEN BLUDMAN,  
writer from Pennsylvania

an equalizer, a tool, a symbol of liberty and power and slaughter and loss.

Some of the 21 gathered here saw a gun as an instrument of protection. One kept an AR-15 atop the armoire. A few often wore guns strapped to their bodies, under their clothes.

Others had been threatened with guns. They feared that guns empowered people who would marginalize or silence them. They had been intimidated, mugged, raped. They'd lost mothers and cousins and uncles and friends.

They'd been recruited from around the country and across the political divide in an attempt to see if it was possible to create an experience that might build understanding. They would spend two days learning to listen, and then they'd join 130 others in a conversation on Facebook, where people often go to hear only what they already believe.

None of them were entirely sure what they were getting into.

Here was Malak Wazne, 18. Before this experiment was over, a Michigan teenager a lot like her would be shot at while knocking on a door asking for directions. Would Malak's ideas be welcome?

Here was Dan Zelenka, a lawyer and competitive shooter, who knew just about everything there was to know about guns. He came to teach. Would he also be willing to learn?

Here was Alexis Intili, who could spot a liberal a mile away. "Dumb idiot morons," she called them, to their faces. The

marchers outside annoyed her. She would never, ever have anything to learn from a high school kid. What did they know?

In a small room, they sat in a circle, close enough that their knees touched. Group leaders coached them to ask better questions, to avoid marginalizing words, to think about how they naturally embed assumptions inside questions.

"It seems to me that this issue all comes down to safety," said Mathilde Wimberly, a retired educator from Metairie, La., who favors gun control. "My question is, What are you so afraid of? But that's offensive." She thought for a moment.

"Can you tell me more about why you feel that you need lots of guns?"

It's the difference, a group leader said, between asking, "What are you so afraid of?" and "What sorts of things make you feel afraid?"

Each person wrote on a Post-it note one thing they wanted the others to understand about them:

"All I want is to come home at the end of the school day?"

"As a law-abiding gun owner, I am not a danger to you."

"I feel like I'm fighting for my right to be alive."

ALEXIS HOPED SOMEONE would insult President Trump so she could go off. She's from Staten Island, where recently she saw two people have a fistfight in a Dunkin' Donuts over whether the last episode of *The Sopranos* was any good.

She's comfortable with confrontation. She was primed for it. But emotion?

"I didn't want to listen to other people's damn stories and their crying."

She's a financial adviser, and in business, she thought, emotion makes you weak. She grew up in an I'll-give-you-something-to-cry-about house in a Republican bubble.

"I never got a chance to know anyone else," she said. "Nor did I want to. I didn't care."

She's pro-gun, but her niece and nephew, ages 10 and 7, are hiding under desks during lockdown drills at school. So something has to change.

She sized up the others in the group. Too young. Too liberal. Too stupid. But she had asked to be part of this, and she decided to give it her best. Then the other members of the group shared their stories. And she listened.

She heard stories about PTSD, rape, suicide and stone-cold killing.

"There's a lot more to this," she said to herself. "Damn, man. I'm a closed-minded bitch."

The conversation that began in Washington, D.C., migrated to Facebook, where it included about 150 people over the next month.

Alexis gave up Netflix so she could settle into bed with her laptop each night and take her role in the conversation seriously. Dan checked his Facebook feed almost constantly.

They were forced to consider the roots



**'I wear a hijab, and travel in the United States, so my family fears that I may be a target. I try not to let my fear shut me down, but rather motivate me to push for change.'**

MALAK WAZNE,  
student from Michigan



**'We are the arsenal of democracy. If you really sat down and looked at the numbers, then you have to support gun rights.'**

DAN ZELENKA,  
lawyer from Louisiana



**'There's nobody in my family that has ever spoken to a white person about racism and not been killed for it.'**

BRITTANY  
WALKER PETTIGREW,  
child-welfare manager  
from California



**'My mother committed suicide with a gun. I believe in the Second Amendment, [but] I'm willing to consider keeping guns from people that would do harm with them.'**

DAVID PRESTON,  
courier from Alabama

of their deeply held beliefs. The questions they would ask gave voice to their prejudices and fears.

Why is your personal safety worth more than mine?

If you saw me walking down the street carrying a gun, what would you honestly think?

Is the right to bear arms unalienable, as some believe the Declaration of Independence suggests? Is this right endowed by God, or bestowed by the government in the Bill of Rights? With an eye on history and another on current events, they re-examined language they thought they understood.

Security. Militia. Well-regulated. Free State.

**ON A WARM SUNDAY MORNING**, on the edge of St. Tammany Parish outside of New Orleans, past Rick's Catfish Cabin and Todd's Country Corner, Dan pulled his Ford Expedition into an earthen quarry and unloaded a bunch of guns.

"My toys," he said.

He pulled out his M1A1 Thompson submachine gun, his M1 Garand, his German MP40, his Swedish "K," his M1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifle and his German MG42. He also brought along a few AR-15s—assault rifles, as they're widely known. The guns Dan and his pals shoot every fourth Sunday in friendly competition. The guns he wants to demonstrate and destigmatize, even as they have become the weapon of

choice in mass murders across America.

On Facebook, Dan had offered a lengthy explanation to the oft-asked question, Why would anyone need an AR-15? Lots of reasons, he wrote. It's the most popular rifle in America. Adaptable for many types of hunting, easier to shoot accurately than a handgun.

Dan's nephew J.P., a high school sophomore, dragged metal targets across the Louisiana dirt speckled by spent shells that twinkled in the sunlight. Time to shoot.

At age 3, Dan wore toy six-shooters to his aunt's wedding. At 10, his dad bought him a .22 rifle for Christmas. "Forty-five years worth of guns," he said.

Dan likes to shoot, and he loves to defend the Constitution, especially the Second Amendment.

"We are," he said, "the arsenal of democracy."

His mind was made up. He was so resolute that some in the Facebook group thought he was a mole for the National Rifle Association.

Gun crimes are down sharply since the mid-'90s, he pointed out correctly. "America has gotten safer, but we watch night after night the news about the epidemic of gun violence."

The problem, then?

"It's the criminals," he said. He supports changes to stop violent criminals from getting guns. But he does not support restrictions on broad, ill-defined categories of guns.

"The term *assault weapon* means nothing and it means everything," he said, "because the term is infinitely expandable to mean whatever they make it up to be. And every time they change it, it expands to include more and more firearms."

"If you really sat down and looked at the numbers—took all the emotion away—then you have to support gun rights," he said.

He has known four people who have been present at mass shootings. Two young women he met hiking in the Grand Tetons wound up inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., in July 2012, when a madman opened fire. One of the women took a bullet to the knee. Twelve were killed, 70 injured—the largest number of casualties in one shooting in modern U.S. history, until the 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, which held the distinction until the 2017 shooting in Las Vegas, where Dan's old girlfriend had been listening to country music. That's three. The fourth was his friend Steve Scalise, the Louisiana Congressman shot through the hip last year when a man opened fire at a Republican baseball practice near the U.S. Capitol.

On Facebook, Dan posed and then considered the essential question: Are school shootings the price we pay for a certain level of liberty?

"What we should never do is allow the criminal conduct of a few to be the catalyst for the infringement of any right protected by the Constitution," he wrote.

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Throughout our history, he wrote, we have sent young people to fight for American rights and ideals. “If someone began attacking our schools demanding that we surrender our freedom of religion or freedom of speech or right to vote, would we comply? I think not. Would we be willing to pay a price in blood to protect our freedom?”

“Clearly, if history is an indicator, the answer is yes.”

On this Sunday, Dan coached his nephew, lying on his belly, staring down the scope of a German machine gun that fires 20 rounds per second.

“You’re going to have to use some muscle,” Dan told him. “Pull it hard. Pull it real hard.”

**BEHIND THE SCENES** of the Facebook conversation, an army of moderators took turns in shifts, helping people craft comments and reframe questions. They nudged women and young people to speak up, and they gently asked a couple of white guys to quit hogging the mic.

Helene Cohen Bludman felt shouted down by Dan and his lawyerly recitation of gun statistics. So the moderators set her up in a one-on-one conversation with Jon Godfrey, a military veteran in New York, who was one of the 21 initial participants in D.C.

Jon talked about living in a rural area, in a house at the end of a long, dark driveway, where police response times were not comforting. He told her about the gun he leaves with his wife when he’s away. He put together a presentation for Helene illustrating the things they had in common: sports, dogs, grandchildren.

“I felt myself understanding for the first time,” said Helene, a freelance writer from Bryn Mawr, Pa. “Honestly, this was such an epiphany for me. I did not change my feelings about guns, but I understood that good, smart people could feel differently.”

Three people got kicked out of the Facebook group. A few faded away. The moderators struggled with how to handle the mansplainers. Were people participating or advocating? Would pulling them aside help?

They read 13,500 posts and replies in the course of the month.

“The litmus test was are people trying? Do they want to have this



Protesters gathered outside the U.S. Capitol at the March for Our Lives on March 24 to demand gun restrictions

conversation?” said Eve Pearlman, the co-founder of Spaceship Media, the firm that helped lead the conversation. “If they are, we can work with them on the habits they’ve worked on over a lifetime. If they want to keep trying, we can keep trying with them.”

Brittany Walker Pettigrew, another moderator, found herself scrolling comments on her lunch hour at her day job when she came across one that made her freeze. The post, by a white male gun-rights supporter, was an attempt to answer the question “Why do people need to own guns?” It has since been edited, but it said, in essence, I need my guns like Rosa Parks “needed” to sit at the front of the bus.

For Brittany, a 45-year old African-American child-welfare manager in Oakland, Calif., that post was so blatantly offensive that she had to sit down.

She and the other moderators debated how to handle things. Was this guy racist?

Should he be banned? But Brittany, channeling the spirit of the group, decided to talk to him and try to explain why people just can’t bring Rosa Parks into all this.

Afterward, Brittany wasn’t entirely sure if the man understood. But she realized that he had actually been trying to say something useful. And then, over time, something much more powerful started to sink in.

“I was heard. And I heard him,” she said. “And there’s nobody in my family that has ever spoken to a white person about racism and not been killed for it.”

**IN THE END**, they didn’t propose legislation or draft a resolution or circulate a petition. They didn’t even change their minds.

“We explicitly don’t have the goal of changing minds,” said Eve. “There is such a breakdown in public spaces for civil discourse. The act of humanizing each other is itself the goal.”

But one weekend in April, Helene, the freelance writer from Pennsylvania, was organizing a community march against gun violence, passing around handouts,



when she scanned the suggestions for protest signs and cringed. “The NRA is evil.”

That would not have bothered her before, but now she knew that NRA members don’t like to be called evil any more than liberals like to be called socialists. Her experience in the group helped her learn to listen again.

“Now that extends to when I have conversations that are not about gun violence,” she said. “I see the shades of gray where before I couldn’t.”

Alexis, the Staten Island financial adviser, swears the change she felt in D.C. has been lasting. She considers her D.C. counterparts friends for life. Even the liberals. She never wants to return to the closed-minded, bubble-dwelling name caller she used to be. When she got into a disagreement with a work colleague, she says she suppressed the reflex to call him “dumb idiot moron,” and instead said, “Tell me why you feel that way.”

April ended, and so did the conversation—on official channels, anyway. Ruth Grunberg of Cortland, N.Y., started a book club for members of the group, and they got too busy chatting to

read any actual books. Ade’Kamil Kelly of East Orange, N.J., recorded a podcast.

Dan, the Louisiana lawyer, attended the NRA convention in Dallas. Alexis went to a business meeting in Las Vegas, where gun laws are as loose as the necklines, so she asked Dan where she should go to shoot something big. He directed her to Battlefield Vegas, where Alexis said she paid \$330 to shoot an AK-47, a Smith & Wesson .500 Magnum revolver, a German MG42 machine gun and a Barrett M107A1 .50-caliber sniper rifle.

She wanted to feel a kickback that knocked her out of her shoes. The weight of the guns. The flames shooting out of the barrel. The smell of hot metal and powder. The thunder that made people around her back up. The vibrations from the guns firing in the lanes beside her. She wanted to embrace the moment when she, a 45-year-old financial adviser, fired a gun that could blow a plane out of the sky.

And then she thought: “You could shoot down a room full of people in seconds.”

And: “What if one of these other people in here is crazy?”

And: “Why are these guns even around?”

And: “It’s not worth everybody being slaughtered.”

Dan would never forgive her for saying it, she thought, but ban them. Ban automatics. Ban semiautomatics too.

Then, on May 18, Santa Fe High School.

Alexis heard when she got back from Las Vegas. The details were blurry. Was it eight kids dead? Was it only eight this time?

Only?

Other members of the Facebook group took in the news having mostly returned to the bubbles of their lives. Malak, who had joined the conversation knowing she represented both Muslims and high school students, got the news in theater class in Dearborn, Mich. She walked from fifth period to sixth watching the live feed on her phone. The feeling among her friends was one of defeat, a collective shrug.

It was eight kids dead, in fact. And two teachers. Thirteen injured. The shooter, a 17-year-old in a trench coat, used a pump-action shotgun and a .38 revolver owned legally by his father.

David Preston, a courier in Mobile, Ala., who was robbed at gunpoint years ago while delivering pizzas, wrote a public post on his personal Facebook page: “What is going to be The Narrative of the gun grabbers when it is revealed that the Texas school shooter used a Remington 870 instead of an AR-15?”

David says he was working for Papa John’s when a gunman ordered him to hand over his tip money. Thirty-five bucks. The next day he bought a gun.

Helene had accepted his friend request just days before. Now he was calling the Parkland students pawns of a liberal media.

Helene thought it wouldn’t matter to the families of those dead kids what kind of weapon it was, and she felt all the old familiar powerlessness and resignation and despair.

Had they learned anything, really? Would any of them change? Not their minds—that had never been the point. But their hearts?

Helene clicked his profile, and then she clicked:

UNFRIEND.

So where does it all lead? As each of them take whatever kernel of empathy or understanding or consternation into the rest of their lives, what will they reap? If an experiment doesn’t produce a new law or at least a campaign slogan, did it do any good? In Staten Island, Alexis is organizing a splinter group, hoping to repeat the project. She figures her neighbors are stubborn like her, and the group leaders had better bring their A-game. Another new group is starting in Alabama.

Last month, MassLive.com, an Advance Local newsroom in Massachusetts, led a new group in a two-day moderated gun conversation that mirrored the one in D.C.

A woman who had lost a son, a mom who had been shot in the face and a hunter still in his camo all came together and felt the same connection and sense of wanting to do . . . something.

They stood in a circle when it was over and tried to articulate their hopes.

“I want my words to have power.”

“I want to make people who look like me less threatening.”

“I want to grow as a person, and be better.” □

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