

# Episode 125-- What it Means When Children are Under Fire

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gun violence, people, kids, shooting, gun, book, children, country, talking, school shootings, school, gun owners, brady, parents, shooter, trauma, point, happened, crisis, safe

## SPEAKERS

John Woodrow Cox, Kelly Sampson, Music, Kris Brown, Ted Bonar, JJ Janflone



Music 00:00  
XXX MUSIC XXX



JJ Janflone 00:08

This is the legal disclaimer where I tell you that the views, thoughts, and opinions shared on this podcast belong solely to our guests and hosts, and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please note, this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's OK, we find it disturbing, too.



Music 00:25  
XXX MUSIC XXX



Music 00:37  
Welcome back, everybody to Red, Blue, and Brady. I am one of your hosts, JJ Janflone.



Kelly Sampson 00:42

And I'm also one of your hosts, Kelly Sampson.



JJ Janflone 00:44

And we are both recently vaccinated.



Kelly Sampson 00:47

Woohoo, go science! Though we are still of course, podcasting solo from our home, one day we will see together in person again.



JJ Janflone 00:56

Anyway, today, the two of us are joined virtually by two podcast - I think we would call them regulars at this point - Kris Brown and Dr. Ted Bonar.



Kelly Sampson 01:04

And for those of you who aren't familiar with Red, Blue, and Brady, Kris Brown is the fearless president of Brady. And Dr. Ted Bonar is a clinical psychologist and the director of of Brady's End Family Fire campaign.



JJ Janflone 01:16

We are also joined by journalists and Pulitzer Prize finalist John Woodrow Cox. John is a staff writer at The Washington Post, and he's here today with us to discuss his new book, "Children Under Fire."



Kelly Sampson 01:28

I love when we get to do our own little book club for the podcast. And this is an excellent one. Now I have to say, as we covered why the stories of gun violence survivors who were not "directly or physically harmed" are so important, and in many ways gun violence harms children in America.



JJ Janflone 01:44

And, you know, as always possible solutions to this issue. We never want to leave you hanging without solutions to these horrifying topics.



Music 01:51  
XXX MUSIC XXX



Kelly Sampson 01:53  
We have a full house today, so Khris, Ted, and John, can you all introduce yourself?



Kris Brown 01:58  
Hi, everyone, I'm Khris Brown. I'm the president of Brady.



Ted Bonar 02:02  
And hi, everybody, my name is Ted Boehner. I'm a clinical psychologist and the director of End Family Fire.



JJ Janflone 02:08  
Great. And then sort of our man of the hour - is it strange for you when you walk into a virtual meeting space and everyone just holds your book up with notes and says, 'OK, let's get started.' Is that weird for you?



John Woodrow Cox 02:18  
I'm delighted. Delighted to actually see it in the world. You know, I've been living with it for it - that's the weird thing about a book, you finish it so long ago and then you wait, and you wait, and you wait, and then suddenly you actually see it out there. So no, it's it's always a thrill to see it waved around at me in meetings.



JJ Janflone 02:37  
Ok, that's a that's a relief. I'm glad we didn't scare you, John. And would you mind telling our listeners a little bit about yourself, as well as your great book, "Children Under Fire" ?



John Woodrow Cox 02:45

Sure. My name is John Woodrow Cox. I'm a staff writer at The Washington Post, and I'm the author of "Children Under Fire: An American Crisis." Sort of the short summary of the book is it's meant to be really an intimate account of the way that gun violence devastates children in this country, also a bit of a path forward on ways that we could make some small differences to help those kids, both before and after they suffer trauma from gun violence.



JJ Janflone 03:15

I think 'intimate' is a perfect word to describe this book, as you detail the ways in which children are impacted by gun violence through the stories of a handful of children. What I'm wondering is: What prompted you to write not just about the physical effects of gun violence and what that effect is on children, but the psychological effects?



John Woodrow Cox 03:32

Well, I think that so much of the coverage around the way that kids are impacted by gun violence focuses on the kids who get shot. We have such a narrow focus. And this really applies, I think, to adults as well. There's this really narrow focus on and that's what the headlines - I mean, we can look at what happened yesterday as an example, right? There's a school shooting, all the cable news networks make a calculation to say, "Let's wait and see how many people died," right? One person died, they move on. That's not a high enough death toll. What I know from having reported on this for years now is that there were kids in that hallway, there were kids in that school, who will be affected by this a decade from now, because they were just present when that shooting occurred. They will never feel safe in their school. There are other places they'll never feel safe. So that to me gets to the scope of this crisis. It is so much broader, so much deeper than really almost any of us have come to terms with. There's a couple of studies for me that really illustrate that point. In Chicago, where kids are dealing with the everyday gun violence that so often goes overlooked in this country. You know, we focus so much on school shootings and mass shootings, but it's that chronic sort of threat that really has a deeper effect on kids. There was this great study that found that children who simply lived in a neighborhood where there had been a homicide the week before, sometime in the in the few days before, the week after that, the scored worse on their tests in math and English, their test scores actually dropped. So this shows that they didn't have to see the shooting, they didn't have to be shot themselves. They didn't have to know the person who was killed, they just had to be living in proximity. And it had that sort of effect on their lives, on their ability to just go to school and do well on on a test. So for me, I just

discovered one thing after another that it showed, we're not wrapping our arms around the real depth and size of this crisis. It's so much bigger than we think. And it's, just that psychological piece, right? It's that emotional trauma that kids are going through. You know, what always causes change, or people to wake up, are personal stories, these really intimate, zoomed in stories. Statistics, just don't move people. You know, I often think about the way that people react to massive tragedies, right, when we see something like the Holocaust, and people have a harder time connecting with 6 million than they do with just one of those people. So I viewed the book, and in many ways, all the stories that I've written over the past four years, as a way to draw people in to deliver a larger point, a bigger idea. And that's so much of the book, it's not a bait and switch, but there is that element where it's like, 'Here's a personal story about these children, who you're going to care about, any empathetic person is going to care about the children in the book.' But then, we didn't want just a sad story, we wanted to then say, 'It doesn't have to be this way. If this piece was different, this kid wouldn't suffer. Or, after they've been through that trauma, here's the small thing we could do to support them.' Because so many of these kids go through this and there's no resources, right? There are none, because they're not considered victims legally of anything. And they're just left on their own to just figure it out, the idea, too, was, I thought that on the policy level, too - I sent this book to a lot of lawmakers, people on Capitol Hill, in hopes that they would connect with the kids and then see things like child access prevention laws. This is one of those laws that I never see covered. It's baffling to me that, there's such narrow focuses on big things like, assault weapons bans for example, when there's very few people saying, 'Hey, why don't we just lock up the guns that we have?' More than half of the school shootings since Columbine would not have happened if children didn't have access to guns. That one thing - more than half. They would just go away if kids simply couldn't go get a loaded gun and then go to school and shoot people with. So my hope is that these personal and intimate and wrenching stories will draw people into those bigger conversations about policy.

T

Ted Bonar 07:59

I wanted to comment that I really appreciate that you're talking about the bigness of it, right? In any conversation in the aftermath of trauma and the aftermath of a school shooting, in the aftermath of an unintentional shooting due to an unsecure firearm, the conversation can so quickly become about mental health, right?

J

John Woodrow Cox 08:21

Right.

T

Ted Bonar 08:22

Or it can so quickly become about gun rights, or it can quickly become about, name the topic of the day that somebody want might want to throw out there. What I love about how you write, and are talking about this is, when you talk about test scores declining the week after a shooting - we're getting at, there's a socioeconomic component to this, there's ducation component, there is a geography, there's a culture, there's an access to firearms component. There are so many different components that go into this problem. I mean, the question for me is, 'How do we shift the conversation culturally from 'Well, the problem is just mental health' Or, 'Let's just give it the Crisis Prevention Lifeline.' And no district I love the Crisis Prevention Lifeline. And the point about the Crisis Prevention Lifeline is that's a little bit too late in the process for some of the situations we're talking about, because so many things go under the radar. And I think what I'm trying to get is: I don't know, whether it's the chicken or the egg, but you're talking about the bigness of it. All of these things are a contributing factor to gun violenc,e and gun violence affects every one of these areas that that I'm discussing, as well. So I really, really love that about your work.

J

John Woodrow Cox 09:48

Thank you. Thank you. I mean, I have that sort of, in the first chapter, I get to this idea of how Americans are not uniquely evil, right? There's that argument, 'Well, it's the person, it's the person.' Well, no, it's not. It's just not, we're not different. Our other crime rates are not different than every other developed nation. The only difference in this country is we have as many as 400,000,000 guns, and we have laws that are worse at regulating those guns. I loved what the one Harvard researcher said is, 'When there's a fight in a bar in Australia, somebody gets punched. Here, they get shot.' It's because there's just the access. So that's our reality, that we have to accept that there are 400,000,000. This book certainly doesn't call for people to be stripped of their firearms or to abolish the Second Amendment. So I think, if we start with reality, the part of this that is so often overlooked is what's going on in Black and Brown communities in the country. You know, I tweeted, right after the Boulder shooting, 'Hey, everybody, half a dozen people just got shot in Southeast D.C., and two of them died.' Like, you're not seeing cable news trucks pull up in Southeast, same thing happened in Chicago that week. To me, that's where the cable news and sort of media failure is so pronounced is that there is an expectation that kids in those communities, like Tyshaun, that that's just the way it is, that that's just the world he has to live in. You know, if a child in the suburbs, a White kid in the suburbs, had when he was five years old run, he's on a on a slide when the shooting starts and he gets tackled to the ground, and then there's a bullet hole in his front door. And then one day when he's six, he dives behind his father's bed, like this is just his life, right? The drawings that those kids did in his school, where the teacher said, 'Tell us about your community,' and they're

drawing these pictures in crayon of people dead on the street and gravestones. Like, that is their reality, and societally we have accepted that that's just their plight. And I don't believe that we would accept that if it was White kids in the suburbs. So if there's one point I hope people come away from, I mean, we all focus a lot on on school shootings, and and w that's not to downplay how much those devastate kids and how much lockdowns devastate kids, kids who grow up in these communities, they don't live as long, they have heart disease, right? That's sort of like a chronic, constantly on their minds, that hyper vigilance, that the people who come back from war experience. It's no different, you know, and I love that you brought up this idea of resilience, because we never say, when the soldier comes back, and is dealing with all this PTSD, we never say, 'Well, soldiers are resilient.' We never say that, but we say it about kids who are going through the same thing. And it's partly because kids aren't as good at expressing themselves. So anyway, I feel very passionately that there needs to be a shift to say, 'OK, a small percentage of kids affected by gun violence are actually in sort of White suburban schools where it's happening every day.' It's like the the researcher in Philadelphia, who told me about seeing kids in school who would have their backs to the wall all the time, and when they'd ask, 'Well, why?'; they couldn't say why. They were conditioned to be on guard, hypervigilant, all the time. That has a devastating effect over many years. And for us to then expect those kids to say, 'Well, why aren't your test scores as good as this other kid's test scores? Why shouldn't have any sort of advantage and getting into the college, you want to get into.' Any of those sorts of things - to pretend that a kid who goes through that is on the same field playing as another kid who's not - it's just absurd, it's just ludicrous.

K

Kelly Sampson 14:00

I really appreciate you making that point, too, because I think one of the things that frustrates me in this area is just how a lot of times for communities like Tyshaun's. people will give the prescription of how to resolve violence, just 'Stay in school kids, and get the job and focus,' and ignore the role that violence plays in making all of those things more difficult to attain. And that doesn't mean that extraordinary people don't attain it. But it's really frustrating from a policy perspective where people will say, 'Well, the way to stop the violence is to just ignore it.' So I really appreciate how you connect those dots as well.

T

Ted Bonar 14:37

One thing I want to mention is the concept of resilience, and I'm thinking about this in terms of the the kids you're talking about that are in classrooms with their back to the wall, and you made the analogy to military and veterans. You know, resilience is important, and kids are resilient and military service members and veterans are resilient.

That does not mean that they're not carrying a profound load with them, right? And so the resilience can enable somebody and give, maybe even most, the strength to go into the classroom and sit with their back to the wall. The resilience is what's enabling them to do that, which is good. And then they can remain vulnerable. Because if it just takes one more thing to happen, and the resilience threshold drops below how much pain they're carrying, that's when we start to see outbursts or behavior problems that then get punished. And with military and veterans, with an adult population with substance use or relationship problems or problems with the legal system. So I think that there's space to talk about - I think we are talking about two populations that are inherently resilient. And that that is not a reason to wipe away the idea that this is going to affect how many people's lives and the lives of the people that they're in relationships with.

**T** Ted Bonar 16:14  
I think it's ready.

**J** John Woodrow Cox 16:15  
And that's such a good point. Where that term gets to me is that it's been weaponized, right? That term 'Kids are resilient' has been weaponized as a way to dismiss - it's basically a way to say 'We don't have to do anything for them. We don't need to support them, because kids are tough. There'll be OK.'

**J** John Woodrow Cox 16:31  
Speaking of being all right, you detail two kids in particular in the book, Tyshaun and Ava and their lives and how they're not alright. And if we could take a step back, since we talked now a bit about Tyshaun's story, can we delve deeper into the story you tell about the relationship between Tyshaun and why xperiences can be used as representations of how gun violence impacts children in the U.S.?

**J** John Woodrow Cox 16:54  
Yeah, I mean, I viewed them as sort of the bookends of the way that kids experience gun violence in America is. You have a first grader, a White girl in rural South Carolina, an area that really holds guns dear and goes through a school shooting. There's a teenager, a 14 year old in their community who gets his father's gun, which was loaded in unlocked, kills his father, drives to the school, open fires on this playground of first graders and kills one little boy, hits another little boy in the foot, and a teacher, but only one child dies before his gun jams. It's 12 seconds, the entirety of the shooting is 12 seconds. And what I

discovered, when I went there, and again this was a shooting that basically no one in America remembers or has heard of, because one kid died. And that was really an epiphany, that reporting trip, because dozens of these children were suffering from debilitating trauma, months and months and months after the shooting. And that was especially true of Ava, who is incredibly bright, just so articulate, she's this great writer, she's really thoughtful. And Jacob, the little boy who died, he was the smallest kid in first grade, she just loved him, she adored him, and has never gotten over his death. You know, she thought that she should have saved him. You know, she had the sense that - she couldn't have done anything - but she had the sense that she should have, that it was on her to protect Jacob. And she started hurting herself, pulling out her eyelashes and banging her head against the wall. And she was diagnosed with PTSD, she's been on really significant adult medications to treat her anxiety and her depression. But it was five years ago, when the shooting occurred. This was 2016. And she's still dealing with enormous amounts trauma. And that 12 seconds derailed her entire life, even though she didn't get shot, even though this wasn't a Parkland-type shooting that left 12 people dead. And she is representative of thousands and thousands of kids. And then you have sort of on the opposite end of that spectrum, Tyshaun, who had been dealing with gun violence since really, he could remember it. I mean, it was just a constant presence in his neighborhood. But again, equally invisible, because he didn't get shot. Typically when we write about these kids, it's like the the little girl in the epilogue of the book, MyAnna Hinten, a little girl who gets shot because her friend found a gun and shot her. Well, we wrote about that. That's typically who we write about. Tyshaun is not who America typically pays attention to. And while Ava represents tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of kids, Tyshaun represents millions, millions of kids, who, maybe they haven't lost a father, but they know someone who's died from gun violence. By the time I met Tyshaun, he knew, personally, he knew four who had been shot to death, friends of his, these were adult friends of his, but he knew four. And he was eight when I met him. And these are just kids who, when we think about gun violence, we just don't even factor them in. It's sort of why I have a whole chapter devoted to lockdowns in the book - that people, sometimes people who are critical of any kind of school shooting coverage say, 'Well, it's such a small percentage, it's such a tiny percentage.' And that's true, it is a tiny percentage, I would argue with that. But the effect of that is so much broader, and it's really illustrated in lockdown. So these are not lockdown drills, actual lockdowns, we looked at one school year, and found that more than 4 million children had been through an actual lockdown. And that number, the real number was probably closer to 8 million, because this is so poorly tracked. So if you consider that 8 million children going through a lockdown, an actual lockdown, some percentage of those kids thought they were going to get shot to death in their school. They didn't but they thought they were, because they've seen Parkland, They've heard about Sandy Hook, they've heard about Columbine, El Paso, all these shootings, they've seen them in the news. And time and time and time again, these

kids text their parents 'Goodbye,' they write goodbye letters, they write wills, saying who they want to leave their toys to. If we want to pretend that that doesn't have a lasting effect on some of them, again, most of them 9 percent plus will be OK, but 10 percent of 8 million kids is a lot of kids. And, again, these these are kids who are just totally overlooked. When we think about the gun violence crisis.

K

Kris Brown 21:40

The way that we also as a society think about violence is like, 'It's kind of all the same.' And it strikes me when I read your book, and I think about so many people that we've met, especially experiencing everyday gun violence, that the trauma is a multiplier in different capacities. You may have someone who has lost a family member to gun violence, has personally experienced gun violence, and knows people in the community, and then here's gunshots. Each of those things is a different kind of layered trauma. And there's a multiplier effect to it. So understanding that, and the granularity and how that impacts how you think and how you feel. And often, if thinking about Tyshaun and how he internalizes things, one of the things that I discovered in reading a lot about this is that for a lot of people, it is impossibly hard to talk about this because as human beings, we don't have the right words a lot of time to be able to evidence this kind of trauma. Words fail us. We're not well-equipped, and especially as children to expect to share what this is about, is ridiculous to some extent. I just wonder how you react to that, John?

J

John Woodrow Cox 23:09

Well, I think that some of where that 'Children are resilient' sort of dismissiveness comes from because kids just don't have the words to say, 'This is how I'm processing this.' Very rarely will I ask kids in interviews, 'How do you feel?' Because they'll almost always say, 'OK' or they really don't know how, so I just get them to talk about what happened next, and it'll come out organically. The morning of Tyshaun, I was with him that whole day and in the room, and he's putting on his vest. And at one point I had to help him put on his clip-on tie because his father never showed him how to put on a tie. And as he's getting ready, he looks down, and then he looks up, and he said, 'Whoever invented guns needs to stop.' So I didn't need him to tell me how he felt. I didn't need that. I didn't need him to say, 'I'm sad.' Like, that quote, that comment, it was totally organic, unprompted, said everything. It said everything. And kids, it just takes time, I think to understand. I find so often that, and I tell reporters this all the time, is to find out what questions kids are asking. If you want to understand where their anxiety is coming from, find out what they're asking, because they will ask about their fears. Tyshaun, in the early days, was very fixated on the shooter, who he was, he was going to come after Tyshaun, he was going to go to jail, that the police were going to catch him. And over time those questions evolved,

but the same thing is true of Ava. The first thing when I go talk to parents and teachers, I always do the interviews around the kids before I interview the kids, so I know the trigger words and all those sorts of things. But I just ask everybody, 'What questions have they been asking?' And that has consistently been the most insightful way for me to understand what that child is, is dealing with. But it just takes that time and effort and care to then take that kids message, what it is that they're dealing with, to the people on the outside world. I think that's why we so seldom them read really intimate stories about kids who have suffered in a really, profound way, because it's, it can be hard to get in. But once you're in with these kids, like they love you being around. I found that one as soon as it clicked, and they kind of trusted me and they realized I was not an authority figure, I wasn't there to tell them what to do, they didn't have to answer any questions they didn't want to answer. Once we got there, I was just part of the furniture for these kids. So I really constantly am encouraging reporters to do more of this work. We need more of it. There's so many different aspects of childhood trauma that just goes totally uncovered in this country.



Kelly Sampson 26:10

And I think that's demonstrated so well in the chapter you devote to discussing gun suicide and to unintentional fire.



26:16

Yeah, you



John Woodrow Cox 26:17

We've done a great disservice to gun owners. Like societally, we've done this great disservice to gun owners that the Eddie Eagle program from the NRA, which is just scientifically nonsense, that you can educate a kid out of making a bad decision with a gun. That is just not true, you can't do it. And study after study after study after study illustrates that point. But there are lots of well-meaning, great parents out there who own guns, who are convinced of that. And, part of I think the use of child access safety laws, and these are laws that mandate basically that people keep their guns locked up, away from children, part of that is just to educate. The people I write about in chapter four of the book, the Paxtons, these are great parents, they tried to get pregnant for years and finally got pregnant with a little boy named Tyler. And he was a great kid, he made good grades, he was obedient. Hee was a loved going to church, he loved God, he was just a kid that anybody would love to have, and was really not that into guns. But he knew where

the key to the gun safe was. And so one night, he gets the key and opens the door, and there's one loaded gun that his father had bought for his mom as a home protection, revolver. And he took the gun out and he shot himself. He was 11 years old. And his parents were in the living room watching TV, and his father rushes into the room, and Tyler was still alive, but it was too late. And the reality is that this happens every day. During the course of this conversation, a kid will find a gun in a home and shoot himself, or his sibling, or his parent, or friend - that will happen. And hopefully that child doesn't die. But it will happen, because it happens constantly. And it's because of this fatal misconception that you can tell a kid 'Don't touch that gun', and that they'll actually listen to you. There was this great survey in the rural South of gun-owning parents. And, so, what they would do is they would ask the parent a question and then they would go ask the kid a question. And among the parents who said, 'My kid has no idea where my gun is,' 40 percent of the kids said that they didn't know where the gun was. And among the parents who said, 'My kid has never played with the gun,' one in four of those kids had played with the gun, and the parents had no idea. And, again, this is not just the negligent gun owner who leaves the firearm loaded on the table. These are people like the Paxtons, who were great parents, and dearly loved their child and would have done anything, they just simply never considered the possibility that their little boy would go get that gun. And truthfully, he'd probably done it before, he'd probably taken that gun out and played with it before. That probably was not the first time, and they just had no idea. And this is happening constantly. So I give them enormous credit for sharing their story. And they shared it for a few reasons. One, is they really wanted people to see their faith, they wanted people to see that their marriage survived. And then above all, they wanted people to not do what they did. And that that chapter of the book ran as an excerpt in The Washington Post. And since then, I've been inundated with emails from gun owners, saying 'I just bought a gun safe.' And, so the point being, is that it's educational, right? If people understand that this threat even exists, a lot of them will go do the responsible thing, if they even know it exists. But they've been led to believe that that's not a threat at all - is that their kid will do the right thing, their kid is responsible. But we have a responsibility societally to keep guns away from children. Period. And this isn't partisan, there's nothing partisan about this because it doesn't say 'If you want to go buy a dozen AR-15s,' you can still do that. You just have to lock them up, you just can't give your child access to them. That is a pretty low bar in a country as obsessed with guns as we are to just say, 'Hey, don't let a child get access to that weapon.'

K

Kris Brown 30:34

Well, and again, we are seeing solutions being pushed, that honestly sometimes when you look at the the panoply and the range of those solutions, things like bulletproof backpacks, white boards that are bulletproof, all of these pieces of equipment and

training of children and how to do tourniquets, etc., it feels a little bit like a dystopian universe. Because while I don't want to diminish the peace of mind, perhaps, that that gives in a world where gun violence is inevitable, and we feel that we're sending our children in as we would soldiers in combat, perhaps that makes us feel a little better. But it doesn't make me feel better. I have two children who were raised in the public school system here in Arlington, Virginia. And it is ultimately the case that unless we solve the problem of gun violence, a lot of these things are frankly, palliative care. And that's not what we want. We want to actually save lives. So ultimately, the kinds of things that were covered in the chapter of the book around the safety expo, I found chilling and really deserve further exploration and understanding of what that means in the context of actually solving the problem of gun violence.



John Woodrow Cox 31:56

Boy, that was that that was such a surreal experience. I went to this school safety expo in Orlando, this was just down the road from Disney. And there's this Jimmy Buffett cover band playing, and this was fairly soon after Parkland, and there was like this giddiness among these people who were selling these totally unproven methods. They had these doors that they said, 'Well, we should put these bulletproof doors in front of every classroom and that the doors will identify the caliber of the weapon and where the shooter' is, tens of thousands of dollars that they wanted to charge these schools. And there was this woman who was selling bleeding control kits, tourniquets basically, and she had this six year old illustrated on her as a way to sort of prove to everybody how easy it was, even a six year old in a school shooting could go over to a friend or a teacher and put a tourniquet on. And it just was like - not until I sort of raised the point with people that said, 'Well, hey, your industry, this can only exist, if people keep dying in schools, otherwise, your business suddenly becomes irrelevant'. Not until then did they sort of switch out of sales mode to recognize kind of the horror of of all this? There was this one guy who I met who is a former Special Operations military guy, who I think was a Green Beret in fact, and he had been traveling abroad when Parkland happened. And then he saw this great financial opportunity to come back. And the idea was to put Special Operations, armed special Operations guys, in schools, who would sort of infiltrate the Goth kids.



JJ Janflone 33:36

His Kindergarten Cop family, I think is how you described it.



John Woodrow Cox 33:38

Yes. Exactly. Right. That's exactly right. And his argument was, 'Well, my guys are much more accurate, they'll kill the shooter better than the SRO would.' This is a \$3 billion industry, people selling bulletproof backpacks. What that signaled to me is that we've decided, as a country, this is the way to solve this, not to stop it from happening, but they assume it'll keep happening, and let's just turn our schools into fortresses. And let's arm more people. And the truth is that some of those things might help. I'm not to disparage every single idea, but it just was so sad that that is the way we have decided to respond is with this \$3 billion industry. Because these superintendents are desperate. Every time there's another shooting, they're desperate to do something to signal the parents that, 'Hey, we're doing something about this,' because we put so much pressure on schools to solve a problem that they have no business solving. They can't stop school shootings. It's absurd. But it's just so dispiriting that we've decided, 'Let's tackle this issue through bulletproof backpacks.' I mean, that cannot possibly be the best way to address this.



JJ Janflone 34:09

And it doesn't address the issue of violence -



John Woodrow Cox 34:55

At all.



JJ Janflone 34:55

For folks like Tyshaun, especially.



John Woodrow Cox 34:58

Right.



34:58

but



JJ Janflone 34:58

also just to hide



JJ Janflone 35:00

Again, for our listeners, on the safe storage, when I'm thinking even of how horrific the shooting was in Townsville, it could have been much worse had the shooter, in that case, gotten access to the gun that he thought was in a locked, coded safe. Turns out it was in a closet. I mean I don't want to say it was a a lucky event that that wasn't available. Well, there are solutions, actually, that we know would work, but we're not going to do those. 'Let's just give the kids buckets of rocks' - that's something you also mentioned, something a school -



John Woodrow Cox 35:31

Right, oh god, yeah. This whole idea that we're training kids to attack the shooter, that's part of ALICE's, the 'C' in ALICE's, for 'Counter.' You watch these YouTube videos, and it's like the pretend school shooter, and you have a bunch of middle schoolers who suddenly become these Green Berets who can just take down a gunman. Occasionally, I have these sort of out of body moments when I consider the fact that we're actually in the richest country in the world, that our solution is to say, 'the bucket of rocks,' that this principal is really proud of the fact that his kids are going to stone a school shooter, rather than saying, 'Hey, why don't we deal with the origin of this? Why don't we deal with where it begins?' We're saying, 'Nope, we're going to create an army of kids to attack the gunman,' which, again, there's no evidence that that is effective, or safe, or saves anybody's lives at all.



Kris Brown 36:34

Yeah, and



Kris Brown 36:35

There's so many poignant things that come off of this, but one of the articles that I read the other day was of a teacher who's disabled doing a lockdown drill with her students, and these were younger students, I feel like it was maybe first or second grade. And the teacher explaining that she is disabled. She was wheelchair bound, and that if a shooter came, that they should think of themselves first. And before she could finish, the students had all talked together and said, 'No, [name of teacher], we've decided, we are going to help you.'



Kris Brown 37:14

It made me want to cry. And this is what we're teaching our kids. This is not the sign of a healthy country.

 John Woodrow Cox 37:14  
Oh, god.

 John Woodrow Cox 37:23  
No, not at all.



JJ Janflone 37:25

Now, and finally John, you end "Children Under Fire" with three possible solutions for gun violence. And we always like to end the podcast with some possible solutions here. So, can you share those, and your reasoning for focusing on those solutions, with our listeners. And then Ted and Kris, I'd love for you to weigh in as well. So I guess we're ending with a fight, possibly, who knows?

 John Woodrow Cox 37:46  
So, I am not a partisan, right? I'm a journalist. But I have done a lot of original research that no one had done before in this universe. And I often get that question is, 'What can we do? What can we do societally to address this?' And the way I decided to address that was to say, 'These are the three things that my reporting shows make the most sense right now,' and certainly not meant to be all encompassing, because there are a great many things. The first being, maybe the most obvious, and that's universal background checks. The evidence is strong that that would make a difference. And, so often you get this argument, 'Well, criminals are going to get guns no matter what.' Well, if we really want to address gun trafficking in this country, the way to do that is to have universal background checks. If gun laws and background checks didn't work, you wouldn't have people driving from Chicago and New York and D.C. to Georgia to go buy guns in a state with much weaker gun laws to then drive them back up and sell them for twice the price. So things like straw purchasing, and I talked to this former drug dealer in D.C. who said, you he used to routinely go to gun shows in Virginia, stock up on guns, bring them back and sell them, and he had an AK-47 at one point that he bought. That evidence-based that would make a difference and is supported by 90 percent plus of Americans - an overwhelming majority of gun owners. Again, this book, obviously was focused on children, what we can do for kids, specifically. So the next there was child access prevention laws. The RAND

Corporation did this sweeping review of every bit of data out there on gun violence, and they found that child safety laws were supported by the most evidence. And this is, again an issue that is largely nonpartisan. Certainly, anecdotally, as I've talked to gun owners, they believe that people who own guns should be responsible with the guns they have. To say it again: More than half the school shootings that happen in this country, we could stop overnight if people simply kept kids from getting access to those guns. Smuch of that is just around education. Ff those laws existed, the parents would hear that. And so it's not about prosecuting a really good father who makes a bad decision. It's about that bad decision never happening because that father's been educated. Jonathan Paxton, the gentleman who I featured in the book, he would not have ever allowed his son to know where that key was if he thought there was a 1 in 10 million chance that his son would do what he did. And that is true of so many parents around the country. And then the last one is research. Since the mid 1990s, the CDC basically suspended all research of gun violence because the Congress effectively banned them from doing it. This is the the Dickey Amendment. This congressman from Arkansas includes this language into a spending bill that devastated our ability to understand how to address this crisis. It would be as if, in the middle of COVID, we had decided we're not going to study it, and we're going to wait 20 years before we study it again. And everybody just said, 'OK, that's fine.' Because literally in the middle of the gun violence epidemic, we decided, 'Nope, the research is skewing away that we don't like politically, that the NRA doesn't like. So we're just going to stop studying it.' We have to study gun violence so that we can know definitively what will work and what won't work. Bbecause one of the really depressing things about that RAND Corporation review is consistently they found - we don't know whether this works or not because there hasn't been enough research done. One policy after another didn't meet the criteria because there just hadn't been enough studies done. So, for me, these are three obvious, nonpartisan things that America could do now that would make a really significant difference in kids lives. It wouldn't get us from the 41,000 plus people who died of gun violence last year to zero. But if we can go from 41,000 to 30, or 25, that's worth it. If we can go from 1,000 plus kids dying of gun violence every year to 500, that's worth it. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. It doesn't have to be zero for it to be worth doing. So those are kind of the three big takeaways from all my years of reporting on this.



Kris Brown 42:16

And surprisingly, sorry, JJ, we're not gonna drive ratings with a fight, because I agree.



JJ Janflone 42:22

Alas.

K

Kris Brown 42:25

It's with a heavy heart. And I agree completely with John, but I'll just amplify two points that are, I think, undergirding what he's saying. One of the things that we did when automobile fatalities were claiming huge numbers of lives in the 1950s was we looked at the entire infrastructure and system, the infrastructure plus the cars and said, 'What can we do? What are the multiple things that we can do to save lives?' Not just the one thing, because it was an epidemic. And so it was safe belts, it was airbags, it was speed limits across the country, it was guardrails. I mean, redundant systems. And guess what? It plummeted, deaths and injuries because of automobile fatalities, plummeted. And we've had in our society, whenever we have a public health crisis, really a way to shape public thinking about this that drives behavior change. So the only thing I'd add to what John is saying is: If we want to tackle and address this, we have to, as part of this, recognize how we incent people who have guns in the home to think about it a little bit differently. And that's what our campaigns to end family fire is all about. It's shaped exactly on designated driver and secondhand smoke, these kinds of programs that have been out there that shaped thinking with words, shaped thinking. When you increase attitudinal awareness, you will see behavior shift change over time. That means shaping how we talk to each other about this, engaging in conversation with each other, reminding parents in conversation, 'Hey, do you have a gun in the hall? You should safely store it'. And these kinds of changes seem minor, but if we can engage in them on scale, they're really major, and the federal government should really get behind that and help and incent those kinds of campaigns - studied, researched, that we know work well, twwhy the CDC funding is so critical, and do it at all across this country. I think that's absolutely critical and can really drive a huge level of savings.

T

Ted Bonar 44:35

And I appreciate and echo what you've both said, of course. And JJ, I'm not gonna fight either. Sorry. As a psychologist, I'm gonna say: Can't we have it all? Can't all be true. I want to highlight a human moment that I think your book really gets at and it's in the comments of both John and Kris. Tyler's parents, I think you talked about Mr. Paxton afterwards, and you talked about what the different decisions they would make. And also there's another part of that story where, I believe it's the police officer who just went out and bought a safe. You end the charter with that, went out and bought a safe. And read the book, it's powerful. This is a human moment. People can look at the decisions they make, and it's often that people will make a decision in a moment of crisis, in a moment after trauma, moment after tragedy, and they can say, 'You know what? I am going to make a different choice. I'm not going to give away my guns.' In some cases, this is a

value for people that want to protect themselves. And they will say, 'And I will store it differently.' And they've made that choice, but it's after crisis and trauma. And what I'm interested in is: How do we move that conversation forward in time? How do we have that conversation, not after a trauma or during a tragedy or in the response to a crisis? How do we have that conversation and educate people? And even that sounds condescending. 'How do we educate people?' But that's the thing: How do we convey the message that safe storage of firearms is a human decision that we can make? And so the fact that you've said that since the publication of the book, you've gotten the letters from so many people saying they just bought a safe or some version of that, that's a human connection? And, that's what we're talking about. I want to add that human element of it. Legislation? Yes. And safety measures? Yes. And safe storage? Yes. And how do we have these conversations before the tragedy occurs? Because I think that that's something that that we need to include there. So I really appreciate how well you've captured that in your book. And I thank you for it. It's really meaningful.

 John Woodrow Cox 46:53

Thank you, Ted. I appreciate that. That's a such an important point. I mean, that's what makes people care. That's really why. There wasn't a statistic, I don't think that moved those gun owners to go by a safe. It was, 'I can see myself in that father.' They could see themselves in that family and said, 'I don't I don't want that to be what happens to my kid.'

 Kelly Sampson 47:12

So I really do want to sincerely thank you for the work that you've done in the reporting and also the writing and also continuing to talk about these issues. Thank you so much.

 John Woodrow Cox 47:22

Thank you. This was such a great conversation. I really, really appreciate it.

 Music 47:26  
XXX MUSIC XXX

 JJ Janflone 47:29

So Kelly, today's moment of unbelievable, this comes to us from Twitter.



Kelly Sampson 47:34

That's not the best start.



JJ Janflone 47:37

Well, you know what, you don't love Twitter? Good, old-friendly Twitter?



Kelly Sampson 47:42

I feel like depends on which Twitter we're talking about. But gun Twitter? Who knows? Who knows what we're about to see?



JJ Janflone 47:49

True, there are some dark, dark corners in the Twitterverse. But in today's case, so there's this user @TheScottCharles, and they posted the phrase 'Tell me you live in America without telling me you live in America' along with a news video.



Kelly Sampson 48:04

Uh, OK, alright.



JJ Janflone 48:07

Yup, yup. So this is a news story. And while broadcasting live in Austin, Tennessee, a news anchor got confused about which shooting they were covering, as there were two major shootings happening at the same time.



JJ Janflone 48:19

Unfortunately, that's not surprising, but what exactly happened?



JJ Janflone 48:24

OK, so the anchor was covering a shooting at Austin East High School. And that's actually one of the school shootings that John referenced in his discussion with us. So weird Kismet. And the anchor thought that the camera footage she was commenting over was

pre-recorded footage but then realized it was actually live footage being taken at another second shooting that had happened nearby on the same day. So unrelated shooting but almost same place the same time.

 Kelly Sampson 48:50

I mean, that's completely horrifying, that we're just so used to seeing so much gun violence on a regular basis in the country that it can be sort of like, 'Oh, which one?', where there are places in the world where this doesn't happen at all.



JJ Janflone 49:04

Yeah, the newscasts are actually like, almost in the same way that you and I do when we kind of make a little flub, like do a little bit of laugh, did a little laugh and then said, 'I forgot about the other shooting.'

 Kelly Sampson 49:14

I mean, that's America for you, right now at least.



JJ Janflone 49:17

And on top of all of that, so sort of just to wrap this up in a awful bow., the Tennessee Legislature recently passed a law to allow for both open and concealed carry of handguns for people 21 and older without any permit - four days before the shootings actually.

 Kelly Sampson 49:34

That's just terrifying. In news this week, on Wednesday, April 14, 2021, legislators and citizens concerned about gun violence in the United States and the role of gun lobby plays in that violence mark their 100th consecutive month protesting outside of the National Rifle Association headquarters. The protest has happened on the 14th of each month since the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.



JJ Janflone 50:01

And that date then took on even more significance after the shooting at Marjory

Stoneman Douglas High School, which sadly happened on February 14, 2018.



Kelly Sampson 50:10

Yeah, and we commend and also thank the people who through rain, shine, wind, snow, and it's Virginia so all of those weather options have and do happen, who have continued to call out the gun lobby for its corruption and role in our nation's gun violence epidemic by showing up each month.



Music 50:27

XXX MUSIC XXX



JJ Janflone 50:30

Hey, want to share the podcast? Get in touch with us here at Red, Blue, and Brady via phone or text message. Simply call or text us at 480-744-3452 with your thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, whatever. Kelly and I are standing by.



Music 50:42

XXX MUSIC XXX



Music 50:45

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