

## Episode 38: It's a Matter of Faith



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**\*\*\*Brady legal music\*\*\***

**JJ**

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Please note, this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's okay! We find it disturbing too.

**\*\*\*Brady musical introduction\*\*\***

**JJ**

Welcome back! It's a "Red, Blue, and Brady" for a very...theological? Spiritual? I don't know. The phrase sort of escapes me. So, let's just go with "super awesome podcast!" or, you know, here's hoping. Now, today I'm joined by three great men-the Retired Bishop Mark Beckwith, the Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz, and Imam W. Deen Shareef. All of them graciously are here to talk about how gun violence, and gun violence prevention, *is* a matter of faith. Together, we're

discussing the idea of scapegoating, the role of faith in gun violence prevention, , arming religious institutions, and more. Then, in our “unbelievable, but” segment, we’re talking not about men of the cloth, but a man of Florida, and wanna be cowboy...well, we’ll get there. Finally, I’ll share a news update that, sadly, begins with the death of a beloved trans-rights advocate but fortunately ends with youth being empowered in their right to protest. As I’ve said before, it’s a lot, but we’re in this together...

**JJ**

So I'm so excited to have these three gentlemen on. Let's go ahead and jump right into it. So can all three of you just sort of introduce yourselves and you know the, the areas that you serve.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

My name is Mark Beckwith. I'm the retired Bishop of the Diocese of Newark an Episcopal diocese and I currently live in Massachusetts, but Matthew and Deen and I we're working together on many things which we'll tell you about.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

My name is Matthew Goertz. I'm the senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in short Hills, New Jersey.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

Good afternoon. My name is W. Deen Shareef. I'm the Imam of Masjid Waarith-Ud Deen in Irvington, New Jersey and the Convener of the Council of Imams in New Jersey.

**JJ:**

All right, well and so thank you so much for coming on. And I was wondering if you would feel comfortable talking about, you know, why it is that the three of you got grouped together. What is, what is the work that all three of you do? Sort of as a unit.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

It began for me after a horrible shooting in Newark in August of 2007. Three college kids were set upon, they were just talking behind their elementary school late one night. Three of them were killed and one survived. And it was a level of violence that the city of Newark hadn't really experienced before. And there are all sorts of responses, one of which was the, to get the religious community together to figure out how we can join our wisdom and our, our commitment together to reduce gun violence in the city of Newark. And that's how I got to know both Imam Sharif and Rabbi Goertz.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

And so as Mark pointed out, we actually got started as a result of my having the very, very privileged vision of being the senior advisor to, at that time, Mayor Corey Booker of the city of Newark. And as a result of that, he initiated an interfaith group that we became members of known as the Newark Interfaith Coalition for Hope and Peace. And as Mark pointed out in 2007 unfortunately there was this incident of violence that took place and we picked up the banner of attempting to reduce the amount of gun violence and gang violence that was taking place in the

city of Newark. And as a result of that we became not only members of this coalition in terms of the interfaith group, I like to think that we became friends as well.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

And I'll jump on and say that I agree with everything that Mark and Deen has said and what happens because the relationship became a friendship, was that we started to open exchange and then we started to think about local issues, but people started to see that these guys actually really don't agree on everything, respect each other very much and that's started to get us invited onto some television programs. And then we ended up starting one of our own and it has become a PBS show for the three of us called A Matter of Faith.

**JJ:**

And I will say it's an amazing show!

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Thank you.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

Thank you.

**JJ:**

One of the very first questions that I wanted to ask all of you was how is gun violence or how is gun violence prevention, how is that an issue of faith? You know, is it a religious issue and if so, how?

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Well, the root of the word religion is "religio" in Latin, which means to bind people together. What brings people together. Now, of course we all can cite incidents throughout history and in the current scene where religion divides people, but I think the three of us manifest this intent of bringing people together. Gun violence threatens life, and we are committed to choosing life and to offering projects, initiatives, ideas, actions that will promote life and reduce violence.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

It's, it's, it's very much in my view, a religious issue. Simply because my faith, Al Islam, it really the term Al Islam means the surrender or the security or the safety and the fact that I wear the title of being Muslim means that I am obligated to promote, preserve and protect the peace. And so when there is gun violence that is within the society, the duty and the responsibility that I as well as others who recognize the important issue of peace within all of our faith, we have a, we're duty bound to try and address those areas where violence is perpetrated. And so we have to try and understand that the human being is more important than the gun. We have to remind people that sometimes the gun has a tendency to take away from the human identity.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

So I want to tangent off for a moment because when I hear the question is this issue a religious issue, it sounds like even though you didn't ask that, but in this day and age, given the polarity

that we're living through, it sounds and feels like, isn't it more a communal or political issue than it is a religious issue? I want to just take a moment and differentiate the two for myself. So as a religious leader, I don't see myself ever asking anyone to vote one party or another. But I do look to find ethical and moral imperatives that I would encourage, press, agitate my congregates and members of my community to adhere to. And then for them to take that and to vote a specific position based on the moral imperative. So I think so what's the ethical imperative here? It's, it's human life and when this much human life is being taken from us so easily and so seamlessly and so it's such a regular part of everyday life that there's one thing that they think religion cannot do or does all the time is to offer thoughts and prayers. That's now become a joke because that's just become sort of a line that people use when they don't want to do anything about it. So (inaudible)the Book of Leviticus says so as a religious group groups, our respective groups, we can't stand idly by if people are bleeding all around us. So that has nothing to do with being a Democrat or Republican has everything to do with protecting our society. And I'll talk more when we'll get deeper into this about how they're not mutually exclusive either, but it can't, it can't not be religious when this many people are dying. I'll end by saying that the Book of Numbers says that, you know, every single one of us is responsible for one another. The way that people are shooting each other, like it's getting a slice of pizza on, on Broadway in Manhattan has made this something that has reached religious limits in my mind.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

I think the other thing JJ that I would like to add to the comments that we've shared is that I think as faith leaders, we are to remind people, don't put their trust in those weapons of destruction, but put our trust in God, put our trust in the strength and the power of truth and put our trust in knowledge and righteousness. There is where the emphasis needs to be placed, not on, you know, the safety that sometimes is a false sense of safety by having weapons in your possession. I think the most important thing that that one can have in their possession is truth, knowledge, and righteousness. And I think as a result of that, lives will become more secure.

**JJ:**

How, how do you feel then about movements or people who will suggest in the wake of shootings that seem to target religious places or institutions? So we've seen now mass shootings at mosques, we've seen them at temples, we've seen them at churches about people who say, well, we need then armed guards in these Holy spaces. What is sort of your response to that?

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

I think the real fault line in the debate, it seems to me, is that people who are trying to um, are on the gun violence prevention side, um, are making the argument and have data to support it, that more guns make people less safe. The gun rights people are saying more guns make people safer. There's no data that I have seen that suggests that, but the impression is among people who own guns that if they're armed they will be safer. The data doesn't support that because what happens is, is it's you're engendering fear and the posture and the uh, the way forward is all predicated on fear. Uh, I think what we commit to and are, are making a commitment for is, is hope is hope and peace.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

So all that is completely true. I agree with both what Mark just said, but I will just cause you're asking, we have increased security a lot in the last few years really since Newtown. And um, and then there's been a, a big uptick in antisemitic incidents and attacks against synagogues. Well we are trying to balance having completely nonviolent approach, on the other hand, the realities of what it means to make people at least feel safe by way of perception. And this was a whole question about that too as well. And the last thing I'll say that again, this would be for later on to go deeper. I do think this is part of what it means for the country to know each other better, meaning different geographic locations. I think people feel very differently about guns in urban, suburban areas and rural and farm areas of the country. And I've come to learn it's for good reasons, but we could talk more about that. So there is a reality of the situation of trying to keep your place running and how people perceive that place.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Yeah. And Matt, uh, having been to, um, your temple, B'nai Jeshurun many, many times and seeing that you have armed security they're professionals. Yeah. I mean they, they are not only licensed, but they have that, that is their work. And there are more and more Christian churches that in some parts of the country that to be an usher, to lead people in and out of church. You need to be packing a gun and that makes it rather risky, it seems.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

I think where we are today, unfortunately, it appears sometimes that we're on a battlefield and in the tradition of Al Islam, there are conditions under which you are to watch as well as pray. That means that everyone is not involved in the prayer at the same time. Those individuals that are not conducting the prayer or not engaged or in some form of ritual activity, those individuals have the responsibility to watch out for the safety of the others. And so in my view, where we are, unfortunately in this time and space, we have to put people on security in order for our rights to worship, to be secure. And so as Matthew pointed out, it becomes necessary to place or put security measures in place in order for the right to worship be something that is not going to be taken away from us.

**JJ:**

I imagine though, that that has got to be such a difficult decision to come to and such a difficult sort of path to carry out, especially when you feel, you know, responsible for a congregation and their safety.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Well, let, let me say this, that we, I had a, you know, um, the whole Pittsburgh, Poway, Poway uh, situation last year changed a lot of thinking at synagogues. And I had a member call me last, I don't know, July, August, and said, rabbi, I would like to ask your permission to have myself recruit another 25 or 30 members of the congregation to get trained with guns and we're going to have, you know, concealed weapons during the holiday. So we're ready for anything. And I was thinking to myself, and I've done a little growing up 20 years ago, I would've said, are you out of your mind? Which is not a great way to answer a congregant. You know, it's, it's not the most rabbinically friendly way to answer, but that's what was the, I still felt that way. And then I said, you know, I really appreciate how much you love us, that you're willing to do this and put your

lives on the line. But, and I said this very calmly, but I said, frankly, you're going to shoot me by mistake, you know, and, um, and we have professionals for this, as Mark said, professionals and, and Cowboys. And I said, we have professionals. And, uh, I'd rather them know who's who, what's what. And, uh, and I really do think it was a, it would be a sign of love for him, but this is what's happened in our world where signs of love have become, let's armor-up, let's, you know, let's put, let's buy safes for our machine guns. And that's the problem is, is that that line between safety and dedication to going too far and shooting the wrong people, which is what happens when you have too many guns in the wrong hands.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

And to your point, Matt and JJ, last summer I took a gun course, a handgun course. It was one morning. And, uh, we got to hold a facsimile and the instructor said to the 16 of us who were in the class, eight of you would have, if this was a real gun, would've shot me in the stomach because you didn't pick it up in the right way. And then we moved to a firing range and we knew a little bit more at that time. And one, one of my takeaways was, oh my God, this is complicated. Uh, you can give me, uh, a morning training and then certify, which Massachusetts will do, then I'm licensed to carry a gun, provided that I, I get permission from a local police department. I didn't have any clue. This is very complicated. And, and people wanting to arm themselves and thinking they're making people safer. You don't want to put a gun in my hand. I wouldn't really know how to use it. And I think that's probably the case for God knows how many people.

**JJ:**

So now all of you have mentioned, you know, these protections against against mass shootings. But one of the things that have come up in you know a really phenomenal blog posts that you actually wrote for Brady was all about the, the tropes that seem to come out from politicians and it seemed to get repeated in the media around mass shootings and how the way mass shootings are treated seems to differ so much based on the perpetrator and based on the victims. And I was wondering if you could sort of explain your stances to our audience a little bit.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Right. And in that piece that we wrote for Brady, we talked about the origin of scapegoating and I'm going to ask the rabbi from whose tradition that comes and it's evolved into something that is, has very little recognition to its original purpose. And Matt, if you want to just sort of give us a thumbnail on...

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Yeah the thumbnail, this is how it worked in our conversation. If Mark you can make the application, that would be, that'd be great. Scapegoat was a really important figure. And the days of all that's called 2,500 years ago or so in the time that the temple and the holiest day of the year for Jews then the Israelites was, [inaudible] before the Day of Atonement or The Day of Forgiveness. And what would happen is that everyone would come to the temple with all of their sins and they would confess it or sacrifice it. Cause that was the way we prayed. And to sacrifice to the high priest who would do two things. One is he would cast all of the sins onto the scapegoat who would then be sent into the desert. And the idea would be that the scapegoat

would take all of the sins of the community and poof, you know, that was it. We had a clean slate and everything was better.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

And where it morphed and how it's been a bizarre sort of carry over from that is that in every culture, scapegoats can be identified. Usually a group of people and I'm thinking back to junior high school and there'd be a cafeteria table and we'd make them scapegoats just because we thought they were nerds. And a scapegoat reduces the level of anxiety in the rest of the community cause you visited upon the scapegoat. And in some ways it works for a little bit, but it never solves anything. So then what you need to do is find another scapegoat. And in the current environment, the two scapegoats when it comes to gun violence are people with mental illness and young black men and they get scapegoated over and over and over again. And to the extent that some people believe it and it doesn't solve anything and it puts a mark on the forehead or on the back or on the wrong places of people with mental illness and people of color.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

As a member of a race who I believe was probably identified as these scapegoats, I would like to say that that is really something that I have experienced all my life. The reality is that when you look at the history of how people of color or people of African ancestry were identified as inferiors and those individuals that possess the darker side of the human characteristics, I think you know, I can personally understand how the whole idea of scapegoating and ultimately not only affect the person who is identified as the scapegoat, but it also adversely affects the individual who falsely thinks that their sins can be put on somebody else because it is a denial of their own misinterpretation of who they are and misinterpretation of their relationship with the other party.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Probably I would go further. I know this is not specifically about guns, but I would say what Dean just described really beautifully is what I think is exactly descriptive of the pain of the utter polarity that we feel today that we are, have gotten really good at shifting the subject and more importantly unfortunately the blame and we are trying to figure out why people are who they are and how it does that we can understand where there may be common ground or at least be respectful of what is not common. Guns manifested what Dean just said more than any issue in this country, but I'm teaching a class of high school seniors right now. I could not get over how, at least according to them, and this is, this is real life kids that most of them every day somehow somewhere think about the fact that they can be shot in school and I, and I'm not in an inner city, I'm in an affluent suburb where, and they didn't seem paranoid, they didn't see melodramatic. Not all of them agreed to the extent to which others felt, but indeed 90% of them said that it crosses their mind almost daily that going to school could get them shot. That is not how I experienced my childhood. And I have to say that I grew up in a very different Manhattan than it is now. A much, much, much more violent Manhattan where my gym-mate, the kid who had a locker next to me, had a gun, you know, so I, we had, we had metal detectors in our high school, so this was not a safe place, but I never thought that I was going to go to school and get shot in the ways that they do.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

The only component of this that disturbs me is what appears to be the suppression of one's anger or the suppression of one's rage and how that suppression ultimately manifests itself in gun violence. And I think we have to do a better job of exploring ways to open, particularly our children, open them up to a more open environment where they can express their frustrations, express their apprehensions, express their alienation sometimes. We have to do a better job of reaching into the soul of our children.

**JJ:**

You know there's, there's multiple forms of erasure happening now too, right?

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

My neighborhood JJ, it's not necessarily mass shootings. It's drive-by shootings, it's shootings connected to some kind of vengeance that is taking place, or shootings connected to some kind of drug deal gone wrong. These are things that's not necessarily mass shootings that have taken the lives of our children. It's the shootings that are connected to sometimes a culture of violence.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

I, you know, it's funny because what happens on the political spectrum is that one side we'll talk about mental health and the other side we'll talk about, well I'm not going to characterize, but I think you understand what I'm trying to set up here by the way of dichotomy and because of what Deen described before in terms of how we treat each other. Those who feel like others are using mental health as an excuse for not dealing with guns. Don't want to talk about mental health. But you know, once again in one container, we should be smart enough, sophisticated enough and colored enough, I mean in terms of grays to say that all of these things contribute and we can have good faith conversations about all of those things. So, you know, but instead what we do is we say, no, no, no, not mental health. No, no, no. It's not about the amount of guns. No, no, no. It's not about racism or lack of education. And then we don't talk about it. And there has to be common ground in all of those areas of discipline

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Where there is some common ground that I'm discovering is in the area that you mentioned earlier, JJ, that of suicide, New Hampshire, which is just North of me and Massachusetts, 90% of gun deaths are by suicide. And for the last 10 years there's been a group of people on the gun rights and in the gun violence prevention and working together to reduce gun suicide cause it's in everybody's interest for that to happen. So I think that's one place where there is more common ground.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

So then Mark, can you articulate on some of the strategies that they are exercising to reduce suicides?

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Yeah. One thing that we just did in New Hampshire is Pat, uh, sent out a packet of materials to the 93 gun shops in New Hampshire and that doesn't include the big box stores, 93 gun shops in

New Hampshire in alerting gun shop owners or inviting gun shop owners to pay attention to people who come in who aren't gun owners who don't want to take a gun class. There are some signs that have been discerned over the course of time where somebody buying a gun may be suicidal and they now done enough data tracking that some of these people do commit suicide with a gun they buy within 10 days. And so, I mean that's, that's just one dimension of it. So many people in the gun rights movements, people who say, I need to hold my guns. They hear people in the gun violence prevention movement and all they hear is arrogance, shaming and self-righteousness and conversations don't even get started, uh, because that's what they hear from the gun violence prevention people. And so everybody needs to learn how to talk more respectfully and differently with one another.

**JJ:**

I think that's just good advice for life though in general. So thank you.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Yeah!

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

What concerns me is the despair that ultimately leads to a person choosing to use a gun in order to solve the psychological or emotional challenges that they face. And I think that to me is perhaps an epidemic portions in our country that we have people that have just reached a point of despair and they're not clear on how to address those spiritual, those emotional, those psychological pressures that this world places upon them. So consequently they look to exit and we have to do a better job of, of offering people alternatives to try and manage the world pressures that is being placed upon people today. Because believe me, we're living in an environment where the toxicity is increasing and the frustration is driving more and more people into a world where they don't know how to manage it.

**JJ:**

What are some things that people can do, of any faith to fight gun violence?

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Yeah, I think, uh, to that point, JJ, what I've discovered in my work in this is that we often talk past each other. So the gun rights people are, are not listening to, we're not listening to each other. And one of the things that I've been trying to do is to understand the gun culture, uh, so to, to listen more to one another. And it's not easy to do. We come at it, I come at it with a level of competitiveness. Uh, I want to be right and the other side wants to be right. And if we can get beneath that, that's sort of ego demanding place to a place of mutual respect and honoring the arrogance that we bring to it that can have a difference.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Well, I, I mean I think that is the, the uh, ego and the competitiveness are really open and vulnerable things to share. Cause I really, I agree with that. And then the other thing I want to say that feels open that we don't say out loud a lot is that when we come from these different positions, we feel them so passionately that we feel like the very fiber of who we are is wrapped

up in it. So some of it is ego and some of it is really how much, and I'll say this, I was brought up to hate guns to, that they, that they, you know, my parents used such emotional language around it that I didn't know anything except for that it's all evil. So on one hand we'd be having a steak for dinner, but hunting was a horrible thing to do. And so they didn't put together all those pieces for us. They just, you know, instilled in us that it was all it's gonna do is lead to horrible things. So we all grew up with these biases. There's a lot of things we could debate about police and bias. And I, I'm happy to have that conversation. But, so that's A, the B is with the two of my brothers on the, on the podcast here, we were on national television right after Newtown and all of us decided in the green room that morning that we had to stop talking about gun prevention and start talking about gun safety. I don't know if you've the two of you remember that, but why we all decided to do that was that we realized that every time we talk about gun prevention, that was a code word for people on the other side of the spectrum saying they want my guns. They don't want me, they don't want me to hunt. They don't want me to go to rodeos. They don't want any me to have protection. And all we were saying was, we don't want our kids dying in school. So if we could agree on that and stop talking about taking away their guns and talk about gun safety, we might get someplace. So that's where my whole, that was Newtown. That's where it all changed for me, where I realized I am a second amendment, uh, advocate, but I have to do it in the context of good faith conversations with people with whom I don't understand. And I don't agree.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

And I, and I, I agree with you Matt. I think for me the growth of gun intelligence is where we should be headed. And when I look at how my knowledge of guns evolved, it came as a result of me having conversations with members of our mosque who were gun owners and they were police officers or they were corrections officers and they were explaining to me their relationship with the weapons that they had and why they had the weapons that they, that they had and how they understood that those weapons were to be used. And I think they realize, you know, perhaps the language, you know, again Mark, that you were talking about understanding the language of gun owners in the intent that they have in regard to why they have a weapon in the first place. And if we can shape the understanding of that so that the priority is not placed on having the gun, but the priority is placed on preserving the human life, that sometimes may be necessary to use a gun in order to save that life, then I think we may be moving in a direction that can bring about a more intelligent understanding of what a gun is supposed to be used for. And there lies to me that's an education component that we all have to go through. We have to go through that curve of understanding, okay, well if, if gun ownership is a reality that we have to face.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Well, uh, what we've discover in the 13 years that we've known each other, we agree on so much more than we disagree on. And uh, to be able to engage in conversations to, to lower the temperature, to depolarize, to come up with a place where there's mutual understanding and respect. Particularly around the area of guns.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

Yeah. I think we have to come to the realization that guns are real, they exist. And when you start separating people and you start marginalizing people and you start using, you know,

stereotyping people, then the weapon becomes a weapon that ultimately becomes an expression of that bigotry, a weapon of that prejudice, a weapon of that mercilessness. And so what we have to do more of is we have to find a way to bring about more compassion, more mercy, more justice, and more fair dealing about how we get to know each other better so that hopefully we don't result in violence with respect to our differences.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Not only do I say amen to that, but I would say that it might be the synagogue, the mosque, the church that can be the place that convenes those kinds of dichotomous, sacred conversations. That instead of us doing what everyone else is doing in society, which is gathering with people that look like us, act like us, think like us, speak like us, which is easy, the echo chamber and watch TV like us. It's the echo chamber. Why can't we be the place that says that even here when we have Thanksgiving at your home, which has also become a battlefield. And uh, and I don't know if the religious movements of any religion are playing enough of that role. I think all of us are still falling in to it's easy to be around with people, with people that agree with us, but the real progress is made by being with people who hear each other, who are different than one another.

**Iman W. Deen Shareef:**

Amen.

**JJ:**

Amen. I think we can all say amen. Thank you all so much for coming on the podcast. This has been an absolute pleasure and definitely some food for thought.

**Rabbi Matthew Goertz:**

Thank you.

**Rt. Bishop Mark Beckwith:**

Thank you.

\*\*\*music plays\*\*\*

**JJ**

I wish there was a better way to transition into this section, but, uh...did you ever play cowboy as a kid? You know, twirling your six shooter, stomping around in boots, planning on riding your horse up into the hills? Probably! I know a lot of people have. However, as you know, guns aren't toys. So if you happen to own a firearm, don't be like this 36 year old Florida man who, while playing cowboy and twirling his guns, shot himself in the leg. Yeah... just picture that for a second. (pause) Additionally, as the man was a convicted felon, he shouldn't even have *owned* the guns. Again, I repeat: guns are not toys! Don't use them to play cowboy!

\*\*\*music plays\*\*\*

**JJ**

Firstly, I have to start with an update on the so-called sanctuary cities. Sadly, some gun rights advocates and militia members from around the country are urging thousands of armed protesters to descend on Virginia's capital later this month to stop the newly empowered Democrats from passing gun violence prevention bills. Among the bills being considered are measures to ban assault weapons, high-capacity magazines, bump stocks and silencers; to require background checks on all firearms sales and transfers; to cap handgun purchases at one per month; and to create an extreme risk law, sometimes known as a "red flag law." The Virginia Citizens Defense League, the grass-roots organization planning the rally, said it has told the state to prepare for as many as 50,000 or even 100,000 people showing up to make their opinion known on the 20th. Which just so happens to be the same day of the annual gun violence prevention MLK lobby day in Richmond.

Sadly, we also lost a beloved advocate. Dustin Parker, a founding member of Oklahomans for Equality, was found fatally shot early New Year's Day. Parker is believed to be the first violent death of a transgender or gender non-conforming person in 2020. Of the more than 150 known victims of anti-transgender violence from 2013 to present, approximately two-thirds of those killed were victims of gun violence.

We also lost writer and producer Silvio Horta, who was perhaps best known for his creation "Ugly Betty." Silvio, who was only 45, died due to suicide by firearm. Horta's writing was known for bringing a unique, diverse face to television, as well as highlighting social issues, particularly those affecting the LGBTQ and Latinx communities.

To end on an uplifting note, however, one of the largest school districts in the country, Fairfax School District in Northern Virginia, has decided to help its student body become more involved in issues they care about. Starting January 21, the district will let its nearly 189,000 students use an excused absence every school year for a protest they may want to attend. The rise of student activism around hot-button issues such as gun violence prevention and climate change galvanized the school board into looking at policies which would make participating in protests and being engaged citizens more accessible for students.

**\*\*\*music plays\*\*\***

**JJ**

Thanks for listening. As always, Brady's lifesaving work in congress, the courts, and communities across the country is made possible thanks to you. For more information on Brady, or how to get involved in the fight against gun violence, please like and subscribe to the podcast, get in touch with us at [bradyunited.org](http://bradyunited.org), or on social [@bradybuzz](https://twitter.com/bradybuzz). Be brave, and remember: take action, not sides.

**\*\*\*Brady musical outro\*\*\***

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