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Talking to Gun Control Advocates

On two recent Saturdays, I had a chance to talk to gun control advocates—and watch how other gun owners talk to gun control advocates in public settings. I learned a few things along the way, and perhaps you can benefit from my experiences.

The first event was called a “Disaster Preparedness Expo” organized by several of the local radio stations in Sonoma County. Fifteen years ago, such an event would have been called a “Survivalist Fair” and no respectable person or organization—certainly not any radio stations in this part of California—would have had anything to do with it. But post-September 11th, the notion of being prepared for disaster is no longer regarded as something disreputable.

How much has the world changed? The organizers of this Disaster Preparedness Expo called local NRA activists and *invited* us to participate—at no cost—to promote gun safety. Around here, this is unheard of; to many people that live in the San Francisco Bay Area, the NRA is only a little more respectable than a street gang.

Most of the people that came by our booth were friendly. Some were NRA members who were gratified to see us present and promoting safety. Others were simply pleased to see the effort being made to encourage safe gun handling.

Of course, there were a few that wandered by that weren't happy to see the NRA logo. In most cases, they made disparaging remarks while hurrying past. Unfortunately, I don't know exactly what they said, because they were just a bit too quiet. One woman who came by, however, made a statement that I could understand: “I disagree with everything that your organization stands for, except that I have a problem with

woodpeckers on my property.” But instead of running off, she stood her ground, glared at me, and waited for a response.

First, understand *why* she was waiting for a response. Unlike the others who made remarks and didn’t wait for a response, this woman clearly wanted to me say something. But what did she want to hear? From her body language—arms across her chest, her stance defensive—I deduced that she had certain assumptions about NRA members, and dearly wanted me to confirm those prejudices.

I did not give her the satisfaction. “You know, Ma’am, there are more humane ways to solve the problems of woodpeckers than killing them.” The tables were now turned; she was now the bloodthirsty savage, looking to kill a bunch of birds, while I was suggesting that she look for another, more ecologically sensitive solution to her problem.

This disarmed her, and we spent the next five minutes talking about self-defense, about why, growing up in Los Angeles, I had become a gun owner, why self-defense was morally right—and why using a gun for self-defense was also morally right.

No, she didn’t change sides, but by the time we were done talking, I could see much of the cold anger with which she first approached our table had melted away. She could see us as people who disagreed with her. We were not knuckle-dragging Neanderthals who liked to kill animals and people for the sheer primitive pleasure of it, but intelligent and educated people who held a different perspective because our life experiences were different.

The other public event I attended was quite different. This may be a surprise to many of you who live in the United States, but gun shows are an endangered species in California. In a number of the urban and suburban counties, city and county governments

have passed laws that effectively prohibit gun shows in fairgrounds and other government-owned property. While some of these laws have lost in court, the struggle continues, because our local governments make minor changes to the law, forcing lawyers for gun shows to fight against the newest version of the same basic idea.

One of the battlegrounds is Marin County, just north of San Francisco. While the county government has not banned gun shows on county property, they have imposed rules that make them much more expensive. Police officers must work at the show, watching for illegal transactions, and the gun show is required to pay for the police officers assigned to the show.

Also, when a gun show is held, the gun control advocates show up and demonstrate. Of course, if they show up, our side shows up as well, both to be available for the news media that dutifully cover the gun control advocates, and to try and change some minds. About a dozen protesters showed up, carrying signs. The contents of the signs suggest that these people should not attempt to make a living writing slogans for bumper stickers. I went over with a local gun rights attorney to talk to several of them, and it was educational—probably more for them than for us.

I discovered that they were upset about the “gun show loophole” that allows private parties to buy and sell guns at gun shows without background checks. The problem is: that loophole doesn’t exist in California. Since 1991, California has required that all firearms transfers (except for a few antiques) to be processed through a dealer, with a background check and waiting period.¹ These gun control advocates didn’t know that, and insisted that such sales happened all the time, and were legal. After we explained

¹ Cal. Penal Code § 12071-12072.

that federal law is different, and the “gun show loopholes” only exists in some other states, they calmed down a bit.

They next raised the well-known “fact” that “ten children” a day that are killed in the United States by gunfire. I pointed out that this is misleading, because many of these “children” who are 18 and 19. They then pointed out that other nations don’t have so many people killed by guns. I pointed out that few other nations have a population as large as the U.S., so comparing raw numbers of deaths is misleading. At this point, the woman who first raised the “ten children” statistic said that statistics are irrelevant!

I pointed out that accidental handgun deaths among children under 14 are actually quite rare, with bathtub drowning causing many times more deaths. The most intelligent of the antigun demonstrators responded that any accidental gun deaths at all were too many. The pro-gun lawyer asked if she was proposing the abolition of gun ownership, since it was impossible to prevent all accidental gun deaths. She refused to admit that her goal was abolition of private gun ownership, but also refused to explain how to eliminate accidental gun deaths without eliminating guns.

It went down from there. It became increasingly apparent that none of this crowd actually knew much about the nature of accidental or intentional gun deaths in America. When I explained that it does no good to come up with solutions if you don’t have a clear understanding of the complexity of the problem, the leader of the herd said that she believed in simple solutions, and that was all that was required. Her closing words were, “We are done talking.”

Was this a waste of time and energy? Not really. By the time we were done talking to these antigun demonstrators, they knew, even if they didn’t want to admit it to us, that

they knew very little about this subject except what their propaganda told them—to the point of complaining about a “loophole” that did not exist.

There is a more important result of this, however. One of the common characteristics of the gun control advocates with whom I have talked over the years is self-righteousness. They are convinced of their moral, intellectual, and educational superiority over gun owners. I have had gun control advocates insist, quite seriously, that they do not need to consider our concerns, since gun owners drop out of high school, are missing most of their teeth, and marry their sisters.

When gun control advocates have to go head to head in an intellectual discussion, they discover—very quickly—that these stereotypes are wrong. Breaking those stereotypes makes it difficult for gun control advocates to feel quite so superior and self-righteous.

Unfortunately, there were a few people going into the gun show who responded in a manner that was disappointing, allowing the protesters to continue to feel superior to our side. Some engaged in what can only be called name calling; one came out of the gun show wearing a T-shirt that had a coarse phrase about gun control on the back, and made a point of stopping in front of them, and pointing at it. If you are not prepared to engage in polite conversation with gun control advocates, it would be best to say nothing at all. Being rude may make you feel better, but it also helps the gun control advocates to feel morally superior to gun owners.

Will calm, rational discussion turn a gun control advocate into a gun rights advocate? While it has happened on occasion, I think it is more likely that it will simply deactivate some of the activists. These people may still support gun control, but you may not find

them showing up on a rainy Saturday morning to hold up signs, or at a city council meeting, asking for a ban on gun shows.

There was one other interaction that morning that is worth discussing. One of those signs was a picture of a little boy—the son of the woman holding up the sign. My wife and I went over to find out her story. As she told it, a man with a short temper who had bought a gun for self-defense had shot and killed her son. She was, not surprisingly, very upset, and prepared to blame guns.

As my wife and I talked to her, we could understand her pain, and understand her desire to do *something* that would take away her grief. My wife and I explained that we agreed that there were people who should not have guns (those who are prone to depression, violence, alcohol or drug abuse), and that we have discouraged such people from having guns. When it was all over, we had not changed her mind, and I do not think it likely that we could; her grief over the death of her son was too deep.

Sometimes we have only one opportunity to make a positive impression, break stereotypes, and provide persuasive arguments for our position. We can't allow our anger or disgust to direct how we talk to gun control advocates. These two events have reinforced what I already knew: behind every position or argument is a person with feelings. We should always be sensitive to that fact.

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