

Sarah Lerner

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Marianne O'Hare: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care. This week we welcome a teacher who survived the Parkland Florida School shooting in 2018. Sarah Lerner who published the book, *Parkland Speaks*, share stories from students and teachers who survived that trauma.

Sarah Lerner: As a survivor, you know what those families, what they're all feeling and going through and it's just awful.

Marianne O'Hare: Lori Robertson joins us from FactCheck.org, and we end with a bright idea, improving health and wellbeing in everyday lives. Now, here are your hosts Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Our nation is once again facing a reckoning over mass shootings and gun violence. The latest tragedy at a Texas Elementary School has left 19 children and two teachers dead. This follows the racist motivated killing of 13 people at a Buffalo grocery store. Our guest has an important and personal perspective.

Margaret Flinter: Sarah Lerner is a teacher at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 17 students were shot and killed just over four years ago. She's also a founder of Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence.

Mark Masselli: Sarah, thank you for joining us at this very tragic moment, and obviously, all Americans' hearts are breaking, and we simply can't make sense out of this situation. You wrote an essay late last year in the New York Times that asked the question, will my students ever know a world without school shootings? Here we are just a few months after you wrote that piece, and unfortunately we know the horrific answer, I'm wondering if you could share your thoughts?

Sarah Lerner: Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad to be a part of this conversation. I don't even know where to begin about what happened yesterday. It is almost two weeks since the shooting in Buffalo. It is a little over four years after the shooting at my school, and here we are again. Except this time, it's an elementary school and they were just babies. It just breaks your heart every time you hear about something like this, regardless of the setting and the circumstances. It's just terrible. As a survivor, you know what those families and what that community, like what they're all feeling and going through, and it's just, it's just awful.

Margaret Flinter: Well, Sarah we're speaking to you from Connecticut, relatively close to Sandy Hook Elementary School and our Community Health Center was involved after that mass shooting and providing grief counseling, and support. You've shared that you sought therapy, later were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Can we take a moment to ask how you are doing and what's your advice right now

Sarah Lerner

for your teaching colleagues at Robb Elementary?

Sarah Lerner: I am okay. It was a very long, difficult night last night. Thankfully, I have a therapy appointment scheduled for tomorrow so this is not good timing, but also good timing. I guess the advice I would have for those at Robb Elementary is to take care of themselves. It's very hard in the immediate to recognize your trauma. Like you're in shock for days, and then you move through the stages of grief regardless of how intimately connected you were to the instance itself. But it's okay to not be okay. It's okay to seek help. It's not okay to just sit in it and allow yourself to kind of go down that rabbit hole. That's my advice for everyone who goes through something like this, seek help.

Mark Masselli: Well thank you so much. Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that Sarah, and I think unfortunately too many people have had to go through this situation. After the Parkland shooting, you were the editor of and a contributing writer for Parkland Speaks and it was a book featuring art and Writing from the Parkland students. How did that book help students deal with the grief that they were facing, and is it a vehicle for others to use as well?

Sarah Lerner: Yeah, I believe that it is a vehicle for others to use. I have friends who teach in different parts of the country and I know that they have used the book in their classes as part of their curriculum around the anniversary and also at different times throughout the year. As far as the book coming together, it -- I was approached by a senior editor at Random House in March of 2018. She'd asked if I'd be interested in working on an anthology of student work, artwork, photography, poetry and prose and of course, I said yes. I spent the remainder of the school year collecting all of that from the students.

I edited the book throughout the summer. I contributed two pieces myself, and then there were two other teachers who each contributed a piece. What it ended up being is just this phenomenal piece of history, it is an incredibly heavy book. The students were so happy to participate and get their voices and their stories out there because there hasn't been something like Parkland Speaks before. It tells the story of these kids who survived something like this and lost friends and lost their innocence that day and it's -- it was a lot to do, but it was important. I'm glad that people have responded well to it, and are able to read it and use it and take away from it.

Margaret Flinter: Sarah, I wonder if you could share with us, how was the organization Teachers Unify Against Gun Violence created, and maybe share with us a little bit about its schools and its agenda, how that came to be and what its worth is today?

Sarah Lerner: Yeah, absolutely. Immediately after the shooting at Oxford High School, at the end of November, Abbey Clements who was the

teacher at Sandy Hook and is still a teacher in Connecticut, and Sari Beth Rosenberg, who's a teacher in New York City. The three of us are in a group chat together. Abbey sent out a text, I want to say it was on a Saturday, she's like so enough is enough, I think we need to start an organization to support teachers to work to end gun violence. Without skipping a beat Sari Beth and I were like, yep, we're in whatever you need. Let's do this. It just started that easily.

We have worked over these months to form this organization. We have a board. We have our tax exempt status. We have done panels that included Randi Weingarten, the president of AFT. Fred Guttenberg, who lost his daughter Jamie at the shooting at my school, Jamie was one of my students. We had on Dr. Joseph Sakran, who is a trauma surgeon and a gun violence survivor himself, as well as others on that panel. We are working to make communities and schools safer, because we know it's not just school shootings or gun violence at school. It's gun violence in communities of color. It's suicide by gun violence. It's domestic violence. It all finds its way into school, because it's the baggage and the trauma that these kids carry with them, or that you as the educator carry with you. In order to fix gun violence, which is also a public health crisis, we want to give a voice to the teachers -- I'm sorry the bell is ringing school just ended for the day.

Mark Masselli: Sure. You know that simple proposition enough is enough should resonate with more people than it has, but we're glad you acted on this. We agree that gun violence is a public health issue. But not everyone sees it that way. In fact, and surprisingly in 1997 Congress ended funding for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's gun violence research, hard to believe. It wasn't until 2020, the federal budget has finally restarted that funding, but I'm wondering what more we can do in the public health arena?

Sarah Lerner: Oh gosh, I don't even know where to start. There's so much we can do. There needs to be background checks, people who are 18 years old should not be able to access these firearms and weapons of war. The Second Amendment is not just carte blanche to tote around your weapon anywhere and everywhere. We no longer need a well regulated militia. I'm not opposed to guns, if you feel that you need to have one to protect yourself and your family, that's fine. But a handgun is significantly different than an AR-15, which is the weapon of choice for all of these shooters.

We need safe storage laws and regulations. We need to not have ghost guns. Like there are so many things that can be done and it's a shame that 50 senators are holding this up and preventing all of this legislation from taking place because children are dying, people of color are dying, like that should not -- it should not be happening, and

yet it continues to happen.

Margaret Flinter: Sarah, almost everything we can talk about relative to this issue is hard to talk about. I think that we -- the last group I want to put any more burden on for anything is teachers and school administrators whose job is pretty hard to begin with. But I think you've written that, looking back at the event in Michigan Oxford High School, that maybe the threat hadn't been -- possible threats hadn't been recognized or taken seriously enough before that mass shooting. What can teachers and administrators look for in terms of warning signs for something that might come from within their community? Have you looked at that? Have you tried to explicate that a bit?

Sarah Lerner: I think it's -- I mean, as an English teacher I see like the students' writing. We in the English world are privy to journal entries and essays and things that like a math teacher wouldn't be. It's we see those things, and we read those things where other teachers might not. It's always hard to know, though, what a student is thinking or feeling if they're not forthcoming and open and honest and share those things with you. Sometimes, there aren't any warning signs, it's the last person you would expect. It's like the saying "If you see something, say something." It's true, but sometimes you don't see things and there's nothing to say, so I hope that helps.

Mark Masselli: Yeah and Sarah we see you in the classroom, you are obviously, as an English teacher listening to words and writings all the time taking the measurement of where students are, and behavioral health issues have loomed large, not only relating to tragic incidences like this but certainly the pandemic itself has created a sense of isolation. I'm wondering what you're seeing in terms of the -- how would you sort of describe the mental health status of the students that you're encountering. What's the sense and feel on the ground in a classroom?

Sarah Lerner: The students who are here on campus weren't students who were here that day, like all of the students have graduated. In spite of that, there's still this understanding of what a school shooting means. We practice Code Red drills and we do all of those things. I think when shootings have happened in years past when we've had -- when we had those 214 kids here, we -- it was a much different feel in the immediate aftermath of those other instances. Now, they get it but on like a tangential way, because they weren't actually here, but they've been practicing these Code Red drills and lockdown drills for years because of what happened at our school.

The vibe for me today, I've been distracted thankfully by your book distribution, so I haven't been like sitting in it. But it's still been, you know, what happened yesterday is definitely at the forefront of my mind and my thoughts. I haven't had many conversations with my

Sarah Lerner

students about it today simply because it's also senior exams. I haven't had many students here, but I know that it's been part of their conversations amongst each other. I just haven't had much of an opportunity today to talk to them about it.

Margaret Flinter: Well, Sarah, thank you for taking the time to join us. Thank you for sharing your reflections. Most of all, thank you for being a teacher every day. Thank you so much.

Sarah Lerner: Oh, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Mark Masselli: Absolutely take care of now. Thank you.

Sarah Lerner: Thank you.

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Mark Masselli: At Conversations on Health Care we want our audience to be truly in the know when it comes to the facts about healthcare reform and policy. Lori Robertson is an award winning journalist and Managing Editor of FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aim to reduce the level of deception in US politics. Lori, what have you got for us this week?

Lori Robertson: It's likely the 10 year assault weapons ban which expired in 2004 will get renewed attention after the deadly mass shooting at an elementary school in Texas. In fact, President Joe Biden mentioned the ban in his remarks after the shooting. Biden helped shepherd the assault weapons ban through the Senate as part of the 1994 crime bill. We last looked at the impact of the ban in March 2021, after Biden claimed that it, "brought down these mass killings." We found that the raw numbers when adjusted for population and other factors weren't so clear on that. However, there was growing evidence that bans on large capacity magazines might reduce the number of those killed and injured in mass public shootings.

At the time, Biden was speaking after a mass shooting at a grocery store in Colorado in which 10 people were killed. The assault weapons ban in the 1994 law prohibited the sale of certain semi automatic firearms and large capacity magazines that could accommodate 10 rounds or more. Existing weapons on the banned list were grandfathered, meaning people could keep them. A sunset provision meant that the ban expired in 10 years. A review of gun studies by the RAND Corporation updated in 2020 concluded there is, "inconclusive evidence for the effect of assault weapons bans on mass shootings." A RAND senior behavioral scientist who led the project told us he didn't think there were great studies yet to determine the effectiveness of the ban.

The research RAND was able to review, "doesn't provide compelling

evidence one way or the other,” he said, but some emerging research about post-ban trends may provide useful information. For instance, research published in 2019 in the journal *Criminology and Public Policy* found that after controlling for population growth, the assault weapons ban did not appear to have much of an effect on the number of mass public shootings comparing a pre-ban period with the 10 years the ban was in effect. But the researcher found the severity of mass public shootings, meaning the number killed and injured had increased dramatically in the post-ban period after 2004.

Research published in the same journal in January 2020 concluded that assault weapons bans didn't appear to be associated with the frequency of fatal mass shootings. But state laws requiring handgun purchasers to obtain a license and state bans of large capacity magazines did show an association with reductions in fatal mass shootings. Other research published that month focused on the role of large capacity magazines. The author Christopher S. Koper, Principal Fellow of George Mason University's Center for Evidence Based Crime Policy concluded data on mass shootings suggest that large capacity magazine restrictions could “potentially reduce mass shooting deaths by 11% to 15% and total victims shot in these incidents by one quarter likely as upper bounds.” He said the success of any ban on assault weapons and large capacity magazines may depend on how the law is implemented, especially with regard to grandfathering existing weapons. That's my fact check for this week. I'm Lori Robertson, Managing Editor of FactCheck.org.

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Margaret Flinter: FactCheck.org is committed to factual accuracy from the country's major political players and is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have a fact that you'd like checked, e-mail us at www.chcradio.com, we'll have FactCheck.org's Lori Robertson check it out for you here on Conversations on Health Care.

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Mark Masselli: Each week Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities and everyday lives.

Fitness trackers have become all the rage, especially among upwardly mobile fitness conscious people seeking to monitor their own health and fitness goals. But another trend has emerged in the age of wearable devices. After a few months, about a third of users simply stop using them, leaving a lot of costly devices sitting on the shelf and not in use. The reality captured the imagination of Tufts University School of Medicine, Professor Dr. Lisa Gualtieri.

Sarah Lerner

Dr. Lisa Gualtieri: I had read about the abandonment rates and I thought what if you could take all of these abandoned trackers and give them to the people who could benefit most from them?

Mark Masselli: She thought what if we could get disinterested owners to donate their used fitness trackers and wearable devices to be repurposed and donated to underserved populations.

Dr. Lisa Gualtieri: A lot of the work that we've been doing has been with older adults, racial and ethnic minorities. For a lot of people they're quite interested in owning one of these devices to help them increase their fitness. For a lot of people the cost is prohibitive, so I think that that's a barrier for a lot of people.

Mark Masselli: So in 2015, she launched her nonprofit enterprise RecycleHealth, an online social media campaign to raise awareness for her program, which seeks donated wearable devices no longer in use to provide these expensive devices for free to those in need. She partnered with organizations working with low income adults in wellness programs, and those with mental health issues, seniors and fall prevention programs, minorities and veterans as well. Her goal is to start collecting vital data on the deployment of these devices and the impact they may be having on behavior change in vulnerable populations.

Dr. Lisa Gualtieri: What we do is talk to people about how active, how sedentary they are, and coming up with a reasonable and achievable goal to helping them to see it as an educational process where they might start off with 2000/3000 steps as their goal, but they know how to make that higher when they're ready to.

Mark Masselli: So far, the numbers of donated devices have numbered in the low 1000s. She's hoping to scale that number up significantly in the future and to expand their data collection on health outcomes for vulnerable populations who gain access to these wearables. RecycleHealth, a simple repurposing of personalized wearables providing these tools for free to vulnerable populations, empowering them to engage in activities that can improve their own health, provide useful data and using these devices to improve population health. Now, that's a bright idea.

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Mark Masselli: You've been listening to Conversations on Health Care. I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and Health.

Sarah Lerner

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Marianne O'Hare: Conversations on Health Care is recorded at WESU at Wesleyan University, streaming live at www.chcradio.com, iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. If you have comments, please e-mail us at www.chcradio@chc1.com or find us on Facebook or Twitter. We love hearing from you. This show is brought to you by the Community Health Center.

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