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It's time to do something about gun violence

Morna Murray | Dec. 17, 2012 NCR Today

I learned about Friday's massacre in Connecticut in an email from my daughter. I quickly turned on the news and heard the horrific details. I had a vivid memory of my now-25-year-old daughter on her first day of kindergarten, in a flowered dress and matching headband that were gifts from her aunt. She chose them carefully and walked off, smiling both excitedly and tremulously. I will never forget her almost radiant innocence, the bursting love and other emotions I felt that day as I realized, as parents do when their children begin school, that she was beginning her journey toward her own life.

On Friday, for 20 very young children, that promising journey ended in unspeakable horror. Parents sent 20 children off to school, like any other morning. And those children never returned. Their families will never be the same. Just as those families whose children have been massacred in other tragedies. This is senseless killing for which words will never be adequate. There is no word and nothing that can ease the pain of the survivors. There is no word and nothing that can ever make up for the young lives ended with a bullet.

But there is one word I do want to emphasize: "unnecessary." It is a word that makes the pain even greater, but must finally be addressed. These mass killings are, to a very large extent, unnecessary. That is not simplistic or "liberal." It is real, as the facts will show.

In 2004, I wrote an article, "We're Not the NRA [1]," as the deadline for the 1994 10-year federal ban on assault weapons was running out. It detailed all the rational arguments why the ban should be renewed, citing public opinion that was against availability of assault weapons. I also argued (no secret here) that the National Rifle Association controlled gun policy in the U.S. I believed, with all this rational and overwhelming evidence, Congress would surely renew the ban on submachine guns. Statistics showed even a majority of NRA members and hunters believed in the ban. Such a no-brainer. Congress, however, did not renew the ban. There were many reasons for that, not one having to do with public safety or good public policy. Since that time, almost nothing has been accomplished to curb the out-of-control gun culture in the U.S. It is not just assault weapons. It is any gun control measure.

The fact that these unspeakable horrors could be curtailed or even prevented makes the pain so much worse, almost unbearable. By now, the articles are pouring in from every corner, citing the statistics on the number of mass killings in the U.S. as compared to the rest of the world, the number of guns, public opinion about guns, and on. As I read these articles, I agree with them, as I always have. But I also remember 2004 and the massacres that led to the initial assault weapons ban in 1994, and I think, This is not enough. We simply cannot go back to business as usual in a week or two. Not this time. As EJ Dionne said, "this time has to be different. [2]"

There also are, and will be, articles arguing that our gun policies are not the root of the problem. Yes, mental illness is a large factor, as is violence in our media and entertainment industry. And many will need to find a culprit to blame to help make sense of the senseless. But in my opinion and many others', our gun policies are at the root of all this. One look at statistics on gun violence in the U.S. versus the rest of the world makes this reality impossible to ignore. The real reasons U.S. gun policy has been immovable must come to light finally.

Let the opinions come, and let us for once argue this issue openly and publicly until it is resolved. Not until the next big news story comes along. This time must be different.

We must, once and for all, see this tragedy for what it is: a horrendous and unspeakable act against humanity, against civilized societies, against a democracy whose citizenry has said it wants more effective gun control. It is an act that has ended and torn apart the lives of countless children and adults, both victims and survivors. It has, as President Barack Obama said Friday [3], broken our hearts. But it is also a horror that could, with our joint action, change, be addressed, curtailed, and ultimately largely be prevented. Don't believe for a second, anyone who is reading this, that you can't do something about this. You can. We must.

For decades, an absurd, meaningless and horrific battle over gun control in the United States has gone on, mostly quietly. The main actors in this battle are the NRA, Congress and the president. All have tremendous responsibilities for the state we are in. As do we, the citizens of this country. The loss of six adults is heinous and tragic. But perhaps it is the loss of 20 innocent 6- and 7-year-old children that will lead us, touch the soul of our nation in a way that we must finally, finally demand change.

It is time for us to have this public discourse. It is time for courage and guts and integrity to take the place of political expediency and re-election at all cost. It is time to end the power of a special interest group that has spent millions on killing common-sense gun legislation and has controlled U.S. gun policy for too long.

In 2004, when the renewal of the assault weapons ban failed in Congress, there was considerable talk about the "repercussions" of the original 1994 ban. In political circles, it is widely believed that NRA influence and backlash against Democrats who voted for the ban led to the loss of Democratic seats and a Republican takeover of Congress in 1996. Elected officials did not want a repeat of this "loss." That may be. But on Friday, six adults and 20 children lost their *lives*, not an election. And in the years before and after 1994, hundreds of children and adults have lost their lives because of senseless gun violence. Which "loss" is more important -- to us as a society, to our elected public officials? It's time to ask these questions and demand answers and solutions. It's time.

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