

Episode 202-- A Look Back on 1994's Assault Weapons Ban

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SPEAKERS

Donna Dees-Thomases, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson, Shikha Hamilton



JJ Janflone 00:09

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JJ Janflone 00:37

Hey, everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue, and Brady.



Kelly Sampson 00:41

That was JJ, one of your hosts.



JJ Janflone 00:43

And that was Kelly, another one of your hosts. And today we're doing something, you know, this is one of the awkward things about being a gun violence prevention podcast, right? When we are talking about anniversaries, they are very, very rarely happy anniversaries. And so we're talking today about something that was, I guess, briefly happy, Kelly, and then changed, and that's the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994.



Kelly Sampson 01:08

Yeah, it's bittersweet, right? Because, like you said, it was a victory and then it expired. But, I think one of our goals with this episode and a lot of the work that we're doing across Brady, is

to get us another victory here so that people can stay alive.



JJ Janflone 01:27

And who better to talk about this bittersweet transition, right, of an Assault Weapons Ban that was passed in 1994, and then lapsed in 2004, then two of the activists who worked to make it happen and fought to try to keep it. True queens of organizing Donna Dees-Thomases and Shikha Hamilton.



Donna Dees-Thomases 01:47

My name is Donna Dees-Thomases. On August 10, 1999, I was just living the good life and on vacation from a great job working for the Late Show with David Letterman, publicizing stupid pet tricks and top 10 lists, and there was a shooting that day at a JCC day camp in California. And the kids that were injured, are 5 and 6-years-old, and they went to a day camp so similar to where my kids were going at the same time on the other coast. And I happen to watch a nightline segment where two police chiefs, one Seattle and one Vancouver, Canada, explain their different gun laws, and I was actually quite shocked. I knew about the Brady Bill, I worked at CBS News when the Brady Bill was passed, when the first Assault Weapons Ban, so I knew there was some good laws, but I was sort of unaware that someone like the shooter, and I know we do not name names here, was able to get his hands on an assault weapon and fire 70 rounds in under three minutes. And fortunately, none of the children died from their injuries. There was one fatality that same day, he shot a mailman. He was a white supremacist. And it didn't take me long to realize that was the weapon of choice for white supremacists and people who want to do a lot of harm very quickly. So what I did was I decided to create a PR plan on how to get people involved in the movement in a very low barrier way and I created the Million Mom March, a nine month effort to create a march of a million moms on Mother's Day 2000. And it was fairly successful, and we became an organization and ultimately merged with the Brady organization.



JJ Janflone 03:29

And we're going to talk about all of that amazingness. But I highly recommend that listeners who want to bask in the glory that is Donna and all that she's done, we'll link, she's got a book, there's a film, (links to this will all be in the description of this episode), she was kind enough to be on a podcast before but we just, it's a visual medium, but we're bowing down. And someone else that sort of we collectively, I think tip our hats off to as an organizing maven is the fantastic Shikha. And I wonder, can you introduce yourself?



Shikha Hamilton 03:57

Sure, JJ. Shikha Hamilton, Vice President of Organizing, and I started in this movement when I was sitting at home and saw on the TV a million moms are marching for gun violence prevention and I went to their website, and it just had five simple things. And I was like, oh, yeah, I agree with that. And I signed up. And within 24 hours, I get a call from somebody. I lived in Detroit, Michigan, but I got a phone call from somebody in Grosse Pointe, who said come to

our meeting, I said okay. And then in the meantime, I had a friend who worked for a congresswoman. So I called him up and said, what's the status? Does she support the Million Mom March? So he's like, okay, I'll check. I go to this meeting. And they're talking about the NRA, the Second Amendment. I knew nothing about guns, my family, nobody in my family owned a gun. So I said, okay, well, nice meeting all of you, I'll help lick your envelopes, but I have no idea what you're talking about. But then just a few weeks later, a 6-year-old took a gun to school, elementary school, in Mount Morris, Michigan, and killed another 6-year-old, Kayla Rolland. And that devastated me because at that time, I was a mom of just a 1-year-old, a 1-and-a-half-year-old and I didn't know kids could pull the trigger. And so that just shocked me that that could happen. And so then that night, I called up Detroit's largest radio station and said, if anybody wants to do something about this, call me. And I gave out my phone number.



JJ Janflone 05:45

Oh, Shikha!



Shikha Hamilton 05:46

And my husband thought I was crazy at the time, but I did it. I gave them my phone number. And sure enough, my phone was ringing off the hook, again, all before social media, trying to use emails. So I helped organize Detroit. I mean, we raised so much money, we took 10 buses filled with victims and survivors to the march. And there were six other, six or seven other chapters in Michigan, and we all worked together and went to the march. But at the march, when I saw the different people, people from all walks of life, holding signs of their loved one killed by gun violence, whether it was a child holding a picture of a parent or a mom holding a picture of a child, I just was shocked. I really did not know the gravity of the problem until I saw the hundreds of thousands of people holding those pictures. And it was that day when I said to myself, it makes no sense why someone who has lost a loved one has to be fighting this fight. So I will always be standing by them to fight this fight.



Donna Dees-Thomases 07:04

I remember hearing about Shikha when Kayla Rolland, and it was devastating, and Kayla Rowland almost looked like my daughter, Lily, the same age, you know, she kind of had that let me comb my own hair, you know, it was a little messy and stuff. Kayla's picture made the front page of New York newspapers and it had happened in Michigan. And I got a call from Connie Rucker who used to work at a Handgun Control Inc., which is now Brady, and she called me and said that all these radio requests had come in for Sarah Brady, about the Kayla Rolland shooting. But Sarah had just been diagnosed with cancer and she was getting cancer treatments and so Sarah cannot do it. Can you? Can you answer these radio calls for us? Absolutely. And I think it was the Mitch Albom Show and he's a big, big, you know, famous person. So I called and the booker on the phone said oh, no, no, we're hearing left and right from these Million Mom Marchers in Michigan, we're all covered, we got all our interviews covered. And I'm like, who are these people? Because I had put that out to the universe and I knew we had some grassroots action going on in Michigan, but I had no idea how deep it had come. And then you know, Mitch, I said, well, who are you talking to? And it was like Shikha was one of the people. So, and again, we didn't have social media. And and this was February 29, it

was a leap year day, and no social media, and the only way I would find out that we had this activity, I would get emails, but knowing that these moms in Michigan just took on the Million Mom March with such passion, such fervor and and they're still that way, quite frankly, those Michigan moms are tough, and passionate and committed.

K

Kelly Sampson 08:43

I'm sitting here with a big smile on my face because I'm from Michigan and something that I'm struck by from both of your stories is just the fact that for both of you, you were doing other things, you were living your life, and then you saw a problem and you decided to jump in, which I think is a lesson for all of us. And, you know, one of the reasons, there's been so many things that both of you have done to make the country safer, but one of the things that we wanted to talk about, in particular today, is the Assault Weapons Ban. So, there was an Assault Weapons Ban that was passed in 1994 and its sunset in 2004. And the Million Mom March happened in 2000. So I'm wondering, were you cognizant of the looming sunset ban during the march?

D

Donna Dees-Thomases 09:32

Yes, in organizing the march, I was aware of it. We, you know, we put it on our website. And of course, there's no reason why we should have these weapons of war back on our streets. They were banned for 10 years. So we were aware of it. But right in 2000, our big concern was kids still getting guns, like the 6-year-old in Michigan. And so, and back then, when I launched my march, 13 kids were killed a day. And so we were working on that demographic. How do we, what do we do about saving children? We were mothers. And it's not that we didn't care about the fathers, and the grandpas, and young adults, which we did. But you know, we were moms. And we were very serious about protecting our kids. So we did things like the Ask Campaign, which, you know, Brady has taken over. And we knew that, actually, the Brady Bill was working, the Brady law was working. But, we did a lot of education about the current laws and the laws that needed to be improved. And we started working on initiatives all across the country. So we helped close the gun show loophole by referendum in Oregon and Colorado in that November 2000 election, so we were very successful. So that was our main goal immediately, was to work on the things that we knew could protect kids, even if it was creating a campaign around ask, ask where your child plays, if there's a gun, if so, is it unlocked, you know, separation of ammunition, which has now become part of the End Family Fire program. But we were doing that very fiercely. And in 2003, the new numbers, now granted, there's a lag in numbers, data that comes out, but the number of kids dying a day went from 13 to eight. And so we took a lot of pride. And we knew not only did we do this, but we were standing on the shoulders of some giants in the movement like Sarah and Jim. And all these, I call them the midwives of the movement, people across the country who had been banning assault weapons in state houses. And then it came along, Mike Barnes, who was the new president with a new name when Handgun Control Inc. changed their name to Brady, and Mike was the one, what do we want to do for the Assault Weapons Ban at expiration? We need to call attention to it. And that is where our sadness and drama occurs, I think with Shikha and I, it was so hard to get enthusiasm to fight it because it was actually working. So there was no sense of urgency. When something is working, then people were like, well, you know, how hard do we have to work? But we tried to recreate the enthusiasm of the Million Mom March in 2000. And we were up against some headwinds.



JJ Janflone 12:22

Oh, could you share, you know, what were some of those those headwinds?



Donna Dees-Thomases 12:25

But what we were up against, in 2004, bogus NRA, fake news, that it cost the Democrats the election, that's been proven to be not true. But we would have people, and we were like our own worst enemy in the movement. And I think that's something to be learned from 2004, to where we are in 2022. We need to believe we can get it done again. And again, those were the hardest, I mean, Shikha and I have some very sad stories that probably need to be discussed over cocktails and not over this podcast.



JJ Janflone 13:03

But we can do both.



Donna Dees-Thomases 13:04

Oh okay, well, I should go get a cocktail now! I think one of the hardest things, like we would book a speaker or an entertainer for an event, and they would come back around and cancel because they had heard that we were canceling our event. And I mean, there was a lot of rumors that was within our own movement. And I have to say in 2004, there hadn't been the Heller amendment yet, I mean the Heller decision, with the Supreme Court. So we were dealing with, you know, the far, and I shouldn't say the far left, I don't disagree with a lot of the people who were, you know, really espousing we don't need any guns, because we're more likely to get killed by them, who felt we should have been going after banning all guns. And they felt that, you know, reinstating the Assault Weapons Ban really wasn't worth their time and effort. And again, that was 2004. 2008 changed that conversation, because when the Supreme Court decided that, yes, you had a right to have a gun in your home, there went that argument.



Shikha Hamilton 13:58

And we were also fighting the notion that people felt it wasn't strong enough. And they wanted a stronger bill and to go after that. And all of us were saying, let's at least keep what we have, renew it, and then work towards strengthening it. And that to me was the most traumatizing part of this effort, is trying to get people to stay on one page, that let's all work together to get this passed, because it's critical. And we knew that if this bill, if this law sunsetted, that the death and injury from assault weapons would go up, and now we have evidence of that.



Donna Dees-Thomases 14:48

And when Newtown happened, again, that was my moment I would I harkened back to September 13, 2004. And I said, it was there, that ban was there, and Congress just let it lapse and our movement in a lot of ways, just let it lapse, trying to make it perfect, which was the

enemy of good.

S

Shikha Hamilton 15:10

That's why when the bipartisan Safer Communities Act came along, and people tried to, to make, to discredit that we were like, no, no, no, we're not going down that path again. Let's get what we can and, you know, improve on that. So I'm glad that organizations came together for that.

K

Kelly Sampson 15:34

Thanks for laying that out. I think it's really important to note that because for those of us who weren't, who saw kind of the effects of the last few years. I think it's easy to forget that there was a ban at one point, and there was a problem, and it was addressed in part by the ban, and then it was gone. So thanks for laying that history out. One thing I want to kind of dig into is, like you were involved, both of you, in this country-wide effort to preserve the ban before it expired. So you mentioned, obviously, the Million Mom March, when that happened, but you also were coordinating with people all around the United States, you traveled across the country. And so I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how did you get involved in this cross-country effort in the first place?

D

Donna Dees-Thomases 16:27

I have to give a lot of credit to Mike Barnes who was President of Brady in 2004. We had a big donor who was an executive at Airstream, and he loved the Million Man March, I mean, his wife, I should say, his wife loved the Million Man March, and he offered the Airstream, he actually had it painted hot pink for us. And then we had on the side, you know, preserve the Assault Weapons Ban that is to expire September 13, 2004. And you know, and sometimes in organizations, there can be a lot of conflict between national staff, particularly D.C. staff, and your grassroots. And that goes across the board, no matter what, what issue you deal with, you hear the same problems, you know, but this was one where it was the the meeting of the minds. We were delivered this hot pink Airstream with the message right on it, we didn't try to, you know, sugarcoat the language, renew the Assault Weapons Ban, it was right on there. And, and so, as Brady staff, along with Million Mom March chapters across the country, took turns driving it cross country, and we call it the Big Pink Rig, I think, and we kept hearing reports back. And as much as I said, the movement was kind of giving us a hard time then, they wanted to go much further than what that ban did. People out in the hinterlands, and even like Montana, and the Dakotas, or whatever, people were honking horns and giving the thumbs up. And the remarks, they expected to get the other finger. But no, instead, people were like, totally excited to see this big hot pink RV, you know, hurling down the highway with a message, and then they would make stops across the country. Different state gun violence prevention organizations, different victims and survivors groups, our Million Mom March chapters and they will hold press events, and then have people sign the postcards to their congressman. It was very uplifting to see that big pink rig pull into your town. And I remember my daughters, who were very cooperative most times with all of our Million Mom March activities, they used to go to the Bronx and they went to Newark, they used to go to all these meetings with me, but when that pink rig pulled into Washington Square Park, in Manhattan, getting ready to do, it was the

Republican Convention, I believe, and my daughters got so excited about that. And the Brady staff let them, you know, sit at the wheel and pretend they were driving. But it was very, it was brilliant. It was a brilliant thing. And I think that if we had had social media at that time with the social media handles on the side, I think we could have generated much more than almost a half a million postcards. I think we could have really blanketed Congress with letters and emails and phone calls to renew the ban.

S

Shikha Hamilton 19:26

But it was a brilliant move on Brady's part to participate in that. And I mean, I remember the pink rig pulling up to, we were at a farmers market, and I just remember people drawn to it and they're like, sign me up! And that's how we got so many postcards. Imagine getting that kind of, I mean, they were handwritten postcards. That's almost impossible. Now I mean, social media you get, sign a petition, you move along. But that was hard, hard work. And I just remember every organization, every volunteer, putting their heart and soul into that effort. So if anything, 2004 was the year that you saw millions of people trying to get, preserve the safety of Americans at that time, and Congress failed us. 100% Congress failed us that year. I'm still traumatized.



JJ Janflone 20:31

Not to ask you to kind of figure out that trauma, but you know, what was it like for you right after when the bill lapses?

D

Donna Dees-Thomases 20:39

What I suspected would happen, started to happen. There started to be a lack of interest in funding grassroots activities. Suddenly, you know, our Million Mom March website, that was very kitschy, people loved our website, suddenly, that went away. You know, we weren't getting funding, then our mom's number, remember, we had a 1-800 mom's number for people who are not savvy with internet or email, that went away, the funding left, so we couldn't have these things that would help enable grassroots activity. And when a shooting happens, where people could go to our website and log on. And I saw that happen. And I remember when I got a call in September of 2005, from someone in the movement saying, how come you guys are not fighting this gun industry immunity bill? And I remember saying, look, Katrina just happened, my family is displaced in Louisiana. And I was working on a project with CBS News called Katrina's missing, so we could help reunite families. And I have to say, it was the last thing I was thinking about with that immunity bill. And I would have to say that was probably in many ways, even a bigger blow than the Assault Weapons Ban, you know, when it expired?



JJ Janflone 21:56

Yeah, I always forget that PLCAA happened then too, which, you know, it had such a huge chilling effect on the ability to file lawsuits against the gun industry, because it gave the gun industry special protections, basically, listeners, which made it really hard to file lawsuits. So

that must have been just, you know, like, two blows for the gun violence prevention community and activists, right, like one right after the other then.

D

Donna Dees-Thomases 22:16

Yes, and the NRA and the gun lobby waves that as their biggest accomplishment. And I look back, as much as that hurt, I know people were, you know, the lawyers at Brady and the lawyers at the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and other places, you know, that really hurt the lawsuits they were working on. The cities were suing the gun industry too for their deceptive marketing practice with flooding the cities. So all that stopped. So, as you said, there are always blows in the movement. That was a blow. But I remember, I don't think there was enough grassroots energy in 2005 to even begin to stop. So, as much as that hurt the movement, that lives have been cost by that law being put in place, the Assault Weapons Ban was the one I'm like, we're losing this, there's going to be horrific shootings because of this. And, you know, there's no funding for grassroots.

S

Shikha Hamilton 23:16

I'll never forget, because when it failed, I had to be on MSNBC, and I couldn't even keep my face straight. Because I was so like, red and just upset. It was, it was devastating because we all foresaw what was going to come after. We all knew that the death toll was going to rise. And you know, you sounded like the Grim Reaper, but you knew it was coming. Because it's, it's only logical. If you put weapons of war back on the streets, you will have or see an increase in death and injury. And I was scared for our kids. In 2004, my daughter was, you know, 6-years-old, and I was scared. And I felt, like I can feel it right now, my voice is quivering because I'll never forget. Just thinking, I already knew about the 1989 school shooting. I mean that was like the one mass school shooting that always comes to my mind when I think about those little elementary kids on the playground, and someone just has the nerve to just walk up to them and just spray bullets. I mean, that thought never left me as I was doing the work. And I was very sad every time that there was a mass shooting because I know we really did work our butts off. I don't have regrets on how hard we worked. The politics in play, remember, this is also after 9/11, when it was still fresh on people's mind to focus on external terrorists and not the internal terrorists and so they always had a way of shifting politicians attention to that than to the domestic terrorism. And we were fighting that all day long to get people's attention. So yeah, I still, like I said, it is one of the most traumatizing times, for me personally, that I remember in this movement, because it, and then Donna's right after that, it was hard to get people motivated, because we did work so hard. And it's always sad to me, that it takes a major mass shooting to bring people into the movement and I'm not discounting that. I don't want to say we don't want them. But it's sad, just in reality that that happens. And it still happens. After Buffalo and Uvalde back-to-back, yes, this country is finally paying attention. Politicians are finally paying attention. We got to keep going. This is not the time to say no, we can't do it. This is the time to say, yes, we can. And we got to keep moving forward to get it done.

K

Kelly Sampson 26:21

What do you foresee for the future of the movement? I mean, you talked about how there is this sort of enormous enthusiasm because of the pink riq and all the work that you all did. And

then it lapsed after the Assault Weapons Ban sunset, but then it's been rising, unfortunately, because we've been seeing more violence to the point that there's now an assault weapons bill that passed in the House, it's stalling in the Senate, and there's a lot more activism. So I'm wondering, where do you see this movement going? And where do you hope it goes?

D

Donna Dees-Thomases 26:52

I think the fact that it's already passed the House, and then we have President Biden speaking about it, almost every press conference he has or every speaking engagement, and the fact that we have had the House behind it, we have the president behind it, and we have, we probably have the majority of the Senate behind it, we need to push for the Feinstein 736 for a vote. So I'm hopeful, I'm hopeful, I think new energy is always needed. And unfortunately, we shouldn't have to get it because of a mass shooting. And I know a lot of people like to use the metaphor that this is a marathon, not a sprint, I have never been a marathon runner. So that metaphor never really worked for me. But I did used to run relay. So I understand baton passing. And just because you pass the baton once doesn't mean you don't pull up to the front when you've had some time to have some water and, you know, whatever, and grab it again, and run a little further. And so that is where I think the movement is. I think we understand now about the passing of the baton. And that is something very different about the movement in 2022, then what we dealt with in 2002 and 2004. It was a very fractured and very contentious movement back then. And I think Newtown was an eye opener for people that, why did they fight so hard for their one little bill to get passed instead of the Assault Weapons Ban, or this? And I do believe that having passed the Safer Communities Act, and having that signed in the law, and it was bipartisan, you realize there are pieces of a lot of legislation in the Safer Communities Act, that you don't have to have one thing or the other thing. Women are multitaskers. We understand you can fight for several different things. We obviously need to get the Senate to pass the background check bill that the House did. We have so many other bills that need to get passed. But I think that is where the movement is different now. We understand that we don't have it all at once. We don't have to have it all at once. Again, I think losing the assault weapons ban in 2004, followed by the PLCAA, which gave the gun industry immunity from lawsuits, both such devastating blows, but now we have a win. We have a win with the Safer Communtied Act. And I think that's where momentum is different.

S

Shikha Hamilton 29:17

I would add, I would ditto everything Donna's said, but I would add that I hope this is the year that people make gun violence prevention a priority for real when they go vote. This is the year to do it. And I hope that people think about since 2004, now we're, God it's 18 years, all the lives that possibly could have been saved. All the people that would be alive today had that Assault Weapons Ban passed then. And I hope they use that to look at the future, that could it be one of us? Could it be one of our family members or friends? And could any of us by voting the right way and making this a priority, we could be saving a life. And I hope, that's really my hope right now.



JJ Janflone 30:20

Well, thank you both so much Shikha and Donna. And for folks who do want to get involved, you know, who've been listening to these phenomenal people and are like, yes, I need to be

you know, who've been listening to these phenomenal people and are like, yes, I need to be talking to my electeds, I need to be out there and engaging, you can do so. We've got links in the description of the episode on how you can go do that. So, just click one thing, and you'll be partway on the path of being like Shikha and Donna.

K

Kelly Sampson 30:43

Well, that was really, as you said, bittersweet. Because personally, you know, it was fun to just hear a little bit more about what it took to get an assault weapons ban from two women who have kind of demonstrated just tenacity and gumption and seeing the problem and then deciding that they weren't going to wait for someone else, they were going to jump in and do what they could to try and solve it. And so, I think that one of my big takeaways from watching that is just dealing with disappointment and knowing that it's something that is part of advocating for social change.



JJ Janflone 31:23

And I think, too, like one of the things that we keep hearing from activists who have come on but I think you really see from Donna and Shikha who have been in this fight for so long and continue to be here is like the importance of longevity in the field, right? Like new people are getting involved in gun violence prevention every single day, which on one hand is great. I love seeing more folks, but at the same time, it's like awful because we shouldn't be a thing. Does that make sense? But, I think it just really points to why it's so important for activists to make sure that they're taking the time for themselves so that they can continue to be active in this space because we need people with this, you know not to use the buzzword, but we need people with this institutional memory.



JJ Janflone 32:03

Hey, want to share with the podcast? Listeners can now 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.

K

Kelly Sampson 32:21

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