

A CIVIL DISCOURSE: SEATTLE ROTARY TACKLES THE TOPIC OF GUNS IN AMERICA

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A few statistics: Nationwide, there are 250 million registered firearms. While gun sales are at record highs, gun violence has gone down. Of the recent 30,000 gun-related deaths in America, a shocking two-thirds were suicide-related. In Washington state, the suicide by gun rate is significantly higher than the national rate: 80 percent. Seventy-five percent of teens that commit suicide do so with firearms from their home.

What do we, as a society, do about the issue of gun violence? How can we reconcile Second Amendment rights with the overall need to protect the innocent from gun violence? What solutions exist today and what steps are needed to balance those rights with public safety? Tough questions. Big challenges. But not if you are **President Cathy Gibson**, who called Wednesday's meeting to order by stating her intention: "To tackle, in a thoughtful way, this often-contentious issue [of guns in society], and expand our understanding and appreciation of this issue."



In emphasizing the need for civil discourse, **President Cathy** encouraged us all to seek common ground—to try to find what unites us rather than divides us. What better forum than Rotary, and what better person to provide the Inspiration for the Day than **Fr. Steve Sundborg**: "We need to reach beneath our disagreements, not because of what we hold, but because of who we are," he said, urging "respectful listening" to the issues about to be discussed.

Following **Fr. Steve**, the ever-sunny **Trish Bostrom** on banjo led us in singing "You Are My Sunshine," which—given the gloom of the winter—was a much-needed spring song. After **Paula Houston** and **Laurel James** introduced visiting Rotarians and guests, respectively, **President Cathy** brought **Tom Jaffa** to the podium to introduce new member, **Dr. Roberto Dondisch**, Head Consul of the Mexican Consulate in Seattle. Dr. Dondisch will be joining the Diplomacy Task Force—which **President Cathy** acknowledged with a nod to the group's founder, **David Woodward**.



President Cathy then thanked program sponsors and introduced the moderator of the program, **President-elect Mark Wright**, who kicked things off with a little humor: "Whose idea was it to talk about guns over lunch?"

After thanking **President Cathy** and Program Chair, **Lisa Mayfield**, for their commitment to bringing difficult subjects to the Club for discussion, **President-elect Mark** noted that regarding the topic of the day, "There's probably not a more

controversial topic.” But, he added, “We want to come away with a greater understanding” of the issue; using “brains, not emotions” to “create responsible public policy.”

President-elect Mark then introduced the three panelists, noting that “I don’t think we could have three better people” for the discussion: Renee Hopkins, CEO of the Alliance for Gun Responsibility and former Executive Director of the Seattle Police Foundation; Alan Gottlieb, Founder of the Second Amendment Foundation and author of numerous publications on the topic of gun rights; and Rex D. Caldwell, Chief of Police of Mukilteo.



“Why are guns important to you?”

Alan Gottlieb said that for him and the organization he founded, this is a Second Amendment issue.

For Renee Hopkins, the issue of guns—as we would learn—is not only professional but intensely personal: First, “I’m a mom”; second, she cited her organization’s role in criminal justice and crime prevention; and third, “I lost my 14-year old brother in the Moses Lake school shooting” [in 1996].

Rex Caldwell noted that his interest in the subject stems from his profession as a law enforcement officer, citing concerns for “safety, responsible ownership,” and “understanding rights and limits.”

President-elect Mark revealed that, as a Mukilteo resident and parent of a teenaged son, his interest in the topic is not only professional but personal. He recounted the trauma that his own son experienced after attending a party last July in the Mukilteo home where three people were shot dead and one other injured. And so, he said, “I have a new perspective on what guns can do.” He added, “As a journalist, I have tried to keep an open mind. I don’t have an agenda. I need to understand the data; without that, we are not doing our job.”

The discussion then turned to statistics. We learned that there are 250 million registered firearms in America; that of the 30,000 gun deaths that occurred last year, a shocking two-thirds were gun-related suicides.

Such statistics, said Hopkins, lead to the conclusion that there should be suicide prevention measures taken at the point of sale for firearms. “We have the opportunity to do real things to help save lives.”

Caldwell observed that there are many means that people use for suicide, including pharmaceuticals as the second highest cause. On a personal note, he revealed that he lost his son at age 31 to suicide.

Another key point made: Gun safety and suicide prevention needs to be regarded as an education process; salespeople need training to help identify people who might be at risk.

In addition, observed **President-elect Mark**: “We have to do a better job of telling our kids that they are on the front line of their own protection.” Reflecting on the Mukilteo shooter, he pointed out that nobody told the police about the alarming texts the shooter was sending; sadly, the shooter’s own mother did not tell police about the gun case in the garage.

What’s the solution?

“If we want to move the needle on this, we have to get into the middle schools and teach kids what to do, to give them anonymous ways to report it,” said **President-elect Mark**, adding, “If eight out of ten gun deaths are suicide, what are we doing?”

The discussion then turned to the Washington Attorney General’s proposed assault weapons ban. Again, vastly different viewpoints were expressed, but the discourse was civil and thoughtful.

“Limits are potentially helpful,” noted Caldwell, “but from a law enforcement standpoint, how do you enforce [them]?”

For Gottlieb, it is important to realize that the issue also involves the people holding the firearm: “The gun doesn’t have the capacity to pull its own trigger.”

President-elect Mark noted that the individual charged in the September 2016 Cascade Mall shooting, in which five people were killed, used what is essentially “a rabbit rifle.”

Hopkins argued that “the most important thing is to keep guns out of the hands of people in crisis who might harm others or themselves,” mentioning that “75 percent of teens who commit suicide get firearms from their own home.”

Summarizing the issue, **President-elect Mark** asked, “Why do I as a private citizen need a gun that can shoot 100 rounds?”

This brought a quick response from the Second Amendment Foundation’s Gottlieb that what we have is “Not a Bill of Needs but a Bill of Rights.”

The next topic of discussion centered around safe storage of firearms and House Bill 1122, which would have made it a crime if someone stored a firearm where it was found and then used to cause death or injury to a child.

Hopkins noted that law enforcement encourages their own people to keep their firearms locked up. “Common sense looks at it from a liability standpoint—criminal liability,” she said. Panelists put forth various opinions on this issue, which is not a simple one. Bottom line for Gottlieb, however, is that there are problems inherent in the current safe storage bill. “We prefer the carrot rather than the stick.”

Caldwell suggested that everyone keep in mind that firearms are “tools that have the potential to cause injury.” So, he said, just as you would not keep a power saw in reach of your child, you should also lock up your firearm. “Keep them locked up; keep them secure.”

The discussion then turned to Washington House Bill 1501, which has passed the House and is working its way through the Senate: “Keeping law enforcement and the public from persons who illegally attempt to obtain firearms.” This bill, if passed into law, would require that victims of crime such as domestic violence be notified if a felon tries to buy a gun but is denied.

The panel discussed the importance of keeping firearms out of the hands of felons. In Washington state alone, some 4,000 felons and domestic abusers tried to buy a gun but were denied.

Gottlieb made the point, however, that the database of these convicted felons and domestic abusers isn't very good, suggesting that "the state needs to jump in because the federal government isn't going to do it."

As the program drew to a close, there was just enough time for a few audience questions that included why and when Alan Gottlieb started the Second Amendment Foundation (1974, when he saw the need for an organization that could mobilize support for one of our constitutional rights).

What's the current thinking about so-called "silencers"? (Caldwell said it was important to understand "silencers" are actually *noise suppressors*, and that the key questions that should be asked are 1) What's the tool? 2) What's the purpose of the tool? and 3) What does the person want it for?).

Do "smart guns" work? (Laws to require so-called smart guns don't deal with firearms already in circulation; under many circumstances, the gun might not work.); and are there model countries or communities that we can learn from? (There's not one answer; we need to take a public health approach the same way we did with auto safety.)

In closing an information-packed and very civil discussion, President-elect Mark added one final thought: Avoid hyperbole in discussing the issues and whatever side you are on, "stop demonizing the other side"—noting that Alan Gottlieb and Renee Hopkins serve together on a task force.

President Cathy's final words: "Let's have a renewed sense that we can solve this."