

Thank you Chairman Briggs and Chairman Kauffman and the entire Committee for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Meredith Elizalde. My son, Nick Elizalde, was murdered in the mass shooting at Roxborough High School on September 27th. I'm here today to speak for Nick, as he no longer has a voice, due to the gun violence epidemic; a disgrace to our society. Nick was my only child, the joy of my life, and my reason for being. He was 14 years old and just 4 weeks into his freshman year and was having the time of his life in his new high school.

It's impossible to describe Nick's personality and his impact within this allotted time. He lived a short but meaningful life. He touched countless people which is evident in the tremendous outpouring of support that we have received since his murder. Nick was smart, funny, dedicated, patient, and kind. He loved sports, movies, and history. He was a gifted artist. He loved Marvel and the 76ers. He was an excellent swimmer and loved water. He was going to take a course in lifeguard certification as soon as he turned 15 with the hopes of working at a city pool, many of which are closed. He wanted to give kids the opportunity to partake in a fun summer activity that have all but disappeared in Philadelphia. He volunteered his time regularly, even winning an award for Volunteer of the Year for his service at the polls on Election Day.

Nick was a most gentle, peaceful soul. Animals loved him. He was so excited to attend Walter B. Saul High School, an agricultural magnet school with a working farm on the campus. Nick was funny and always smiling. He had a playful side that uplifted those around him. However, he did walk this earth with a deep concern for all living creatures. Nick felt the pain of the oppressed and the downtrodden. He marched for Black Lives Matter, women's rights, immigration rights, climate justice, a Free Palestine, Kashmir, and ironically, gun sense. He wanted to effect change. Nick was willing to put himself on the line for any of his fellow human beings. Nick was innately calm and inherently nonviolent. There are examples throughout his short life when he befriended those who at first, sought to bully him. Nick never chose violence and never associated with those who did.

This is why it is particularly abhorrent that he was gunned down at school. My son was taken in a most violent manner for absolutely no reason and to add insult to injury, it feels as if our government turns a blind eye to this epidemic which can absolutely be eliminated. You simply cannot imagine what it's like to witness your child's murder, to hold him as he dies, and to be utterly powerless. You cannot imagine what it's like to attend a high school football game where 5 assassins shoot up an entire block of unarmed students as they leave the football field for the locker room. You cannot imagine what it's like to hear over 60 shots and run up a hill to try to save your child, only to find that he's not bleeding because it was a direct shot to the heart. You cannot imagine the impossible choice of wasting precious seconds to call 911 instead of speaking directly to your child because these are the last few seconds you'll ever have with him on this earth. You cannot imagine what it's like to see the whites of your child's eyes and to see him gasping for breath, afraid that with those gasps, he's inhaling the dirt that he's lying in. You cannot imagine the warped sense of time while you wait for an ambulance that doesn't come or the battle through rush hour traffic to get to the nearest trauma center, 30 minutes away. I felt



Nick's first kick in utero on Mother's Day 2007. I felt his first breath and cry as they placed him on my chest as he came into this world on Monday night, October 8, 2007. I felt his last breath, in my arms, nearly 6 months ago. You cannot imagine what it feels like to hold your child as his soul transitions to eternal life. No words exist to describe the all encompassing pain. You simply cannot imagine any of it and you don't want to.

This is my reality. Like many survivors, I live with raging PTSD. Every sudden noise and movement takes me back to the shooting. The scene of Nick's murder replays in mind, almost without even momentary escape. Watching my beautiful boy gunned down in a hail of nearly 70 bullets and running to protect him, to no avail, has left me with indescribable torment. My entire identity has collapsed; it's as if I died too but just not enough. I have major depression in which I cannot stand up or speak, at times. I will never hear someone call me "mom" again. I will never have grandchildren. I live alone now, in an ever present reminder of what I lost, none of which compares to what Nick lost: he will never learn how to drive, go to a prom, vote, graduate, go on a date, get married, or have children. But the loss of Nick's life extends much further than his family and friends. Nick's murder is a loss to humanity. He was truly one of a kind and had an immensely bright future. We'll never know what he might've contributed but we definitely know it would've been monumental. It is now up to me to make a contribution on his behalf, cementing his legacy and not allowing his death to be in vain. He's not a statistic. He's not number 23 of juveniles who were shot and killed in Philadelphia in 2022, a year that saw 512 murders. He's a person who deserved a chance at life and laws that protected him. We failed Nick and by doing so, our future.

Sadly, I am not alone in my experience as a survivor of gun violence in Philadelphia. I am a Philadelphia high school teacher and I cannot tell you the number of students affected by gun violence who have no option but to normalize it, in an attempt to survive. It's inexcusable. Responsible adults teach the youth that they need to get an education and participate in extracurricular activities and stay away from negative influences. But what incentive do they have to do that when our schools and after school activities are unsafe? Our youth are living in hopelessness and have no sense of safety which is our responsibility to rectify.

This is unequivocally the fault of illegal guns and our government's unwillingness to act, of which I am ashamed. I will not stand idly by while our society sinks further into this catastrophic failure. While I acknowledge that I don't know how the guns ended up in the hands of Nick's murderers, I live with the knowledge that a felon purchased the ammunition that killed my son. This man was on house arrest when he murdered Nick. Under Pennsylvania law, he was not legally allowed to purchase ammunition and yet there are no laws to enforce this. In my view, Pennsylvania lawmakers protected Nick's assassin rather than protecting Nick from illegal guns while at school. How could you possibly argue against stronger background checks? What could possibly be of higher priority than the safety of our children? Why are we not stopping the flow of illegal guns into the hands of those who murder children at school? Why do we accept this as our reality when it is an entirely manmade, uniquely American problem with a solution?



I implore this body to act in the best interest of public safety because The Second Amendment does not trump the right to live. Thank you.