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The NRA I Grew Up with Wasn't a Death Cult

Kim Kelly

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My most vivid early memory of my dad is him crouching down to slit open the belly of a deer he'd shot hours before, the stench of death and freshly spilled entrails wafting in the night air. It was pitch black outside, and the pine trees whisped around us as my five-year-old hands kept the flashlight trained on his knife. The smell of the deer's innards made me gag, which, in turn, made my dad laugh. Once he told me I could go, I ran back through the darkness, clomping along in his big camo boots I liked to wear. We ate well the next day.

I know this kind of scenario may sound kind of nightmarish to some people, but to me, even as a small girl, it was totally normal. Crashing around in the woods with my dad—helping him track deer and setting rabbit traps and splashing in cedar swamps—was my favorite thing in the world, even when I came home scratched up or covered in chiggers. Growing up in a hunting family also meant growing up in a gun family, and that, to some extent, I had the same familiarity with firearms that I did with blood and the wilderness. My dad had dozens of guns, as did my granddad, my uncles, and all of their friends.

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It seemed completely unremarkable to me then, and I was always taught to view guns as tools—tools to be handled carefully, used responsibly, and respected for the power they held.

This was instilled in me by my father, and reinforced by the training I absorbed via various Buckmasters and NRA-sponsored or affiliated gun-safety programs. “Don’t touch daddy’s guns,” was right up there with, “Don’t forget to wash your hands,” and “Finish your peas,” when it came to canonical childhood lessons. I knew the difference between a standard rifle and a muzzleloader before I learned my times tables, and also knew that if you wanted to pick one up, you first needed to make sure it wasn’t loaded, and that if it was, that the safety was on and you were pointing the muzzle at the ground. Gun safety was drilled into me from a very early age, and as a result, even as mass shootings at schools and other public places became more visible in American culture, I was never scared or uncomfortable around firearms. The people wielding them, sure, but not the weapons themselves.

All that changed at the alt-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, last year, when men in combat fatigues with ARs slung over their shoulders stalked the streets and threatened to kill me and my friends. If my evolving views on guns hadn’t really budged much before then, they sure as shit did that day. And as the movement led by survivors of the Parkland shooting has picked up steam and gun control roared back into the national conversation, the NRA—a group everyone in my family belonged to when I was a kid, and still does—looks more dangerous than ever.

At the 2018 CPAC confab last month, the NRA’s executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, went so far as to dismiss concerns about gun deaths as an effort to “eliminate all individual freedoms.” He also suggested the Parkland survivors were “opportunists,” and trotted out guns-rights absolutists’ favorite old

chestnut: The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.

But before the NRA converted entirely into a Second Amendment-obsessed blood cult, advocating for responsible gun ownership was at least one of their *raison d'être*. The year I was born, the organization launched its Eddie Eagle GunSafe program, a gun-accident prevention initiative aimed at kids that promises to teach them about safety. Its graphics and branding have grown fancier since then, but the program's core message still revolves around four steps—"Stop! Don't touch. Run away. Tell a grown-up"—which are as simple as they are practical (though the efficacy of such programs has been disputed).

My absolute favorite video as a little kid was *The Misadventures of Bubba*, a goofy hunting safety video starring Jim Varney that was distributed as part of Buckmasters' Young Bucks kids program; I must've watched it nearly every day for years, adding another layer of emphasis to Eddie Eagle's take on gun-safety education. This kind of cultural conditioning worked for me, but was also reinforced by my family—all the cutesy cartoons in the world are no substitute for what kids are actually taught at home. I was lucky to have been raised in a family that took gun safety seriously, but that's just it: I was lucky.

Now, when I think about self-styled gun-rights groups like the NRA, it's impossible to ignore at least some of their members lampooning survivors of mass shootings and advocating for flooding schools with guns to protect kids. Their deep pockets, fervent membership base, and exorbitantly powerful lobbying arm have stymied any kind of meaningful gun reform for decades. Of course, this means my childhood perception was naïve—the group was never, in my lifetime, at least, a harmless collection of hobbyists. In fact, they have long been said to serve as the most powerful (and radical) lobby in America, and when tragedy after tragedy fails to produce any kind of meaningful reform, it's impossible to ignore the truth in that.

But maybe, just maybe, Parkland is beginning to change that. Some of the NRA's erstwhile allies in corporate America have started to jump ship, the group's polarizing primary spokesperson Dana Loesch was recently publicly eviscerated by teens, and social media remains ablaze with calls to #BoycottTheNRA.

This has been hard for me to grapple with just because of how deeply enmeshed the organization was in my upbringing, and how naive I can see I once was. I grew up in an incredibly rural, unincorporated community in the middle of a nature preserve, without cable TV or the internet or any real lifeline to the outside world beyond books and my traveling soccer team. We didn't have a police force, and state troopers only materialized if you were *really* speeding. Guns were just a part of life, as was the expectation that you knew how to handle them.

My dad's been an NRA Lifetime Member for as long as I've been alive, and has the hideous brown leather logo jacket hanging in his closet to prove it. My granddad's been a member for so long that they've run out of perks to give him. I remember how pumped my cousins were to get their Junior memberships once they received their first guns (at age 12, on Christmas, as per family tradition). The NRA's blocky red logo was quietly omnipresent in our home, from the window decal on dad's grey pickup to the foil sticker slapped onto the side of his favorite rifle case. I was never a member myself—in my family, girls didn't get guns—but even though I've since moved and have lived in multiple major cities since then, I can't erase my upbringing, or unlearn the lessons that come with it.

But you also don't have to support the traditionally liberal version of gun control to see that the NRA's stance on America's mass shooting nightmare is morally bankrupt.

What people like me can do is recognize a simple truth: The NRA is a problem, and no matter how committed the organization may have been to gun safety in past decades, no matter how pleasant our memories may be of its role in our child-

hoods, times have changed—and those who continue to support the NRA have blood on their hands.