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2024 Essay Contest \$500 Scholarship Award Winner

(Author's name and high school withheld at student's request)

Untitled

As bullets rained down from above that night, piercing the bodies of unsuspecting innocents for death to claim as his own, most people below would not have noticed initially. Enraptured by the concert performance before them, the music would have momentarily drowned out the shouts and screams of the first victims until the entire crowd realized that they were in the midst of a mass shooting. As the shooter wounded and killed with his death machines, my Mom crawled amidst the chaos with her friends and sister to find refuge under the stage, all the while a bloodbath ensued around them.

At the time, I was eleven years old, a fresh-faced sixth grader who slept soundly while my Mom fought to survive. Come morning, my Dad did not provide me with all the exact details, for I did not need to know them nor could I understand the depth of what my mother had endured that night. I was just glad to know my Mom was physically unharmed, especially since so many others were not so lucky. The Las Vegas shooting was the deadliest in United States history, with fifty-eight people killed and more than 400 people wounded by gunfire.

Currently, there is no federal limit on the number of firearms or amount of ammunition a single individual can possess, nor is there a national requirement for licensing gun owners or registering their weapons. While federal law requires cursory background checks on those purchasing firearms from federally licensed firearm dealers, done instantaneously by computer in most cases, to see if they're on a chronically incomplete list of persons prohibited from owning guns, there remains no federal requirement for law enforcement officials to conduct in-person interviews with prospective gun buyers, their intimate partners, and others who know them well; for gun buyers to show a good reason for owning a firearm and that they can handle one safely; or for those who seek to own guns to demonstrate that they're mentally stable. And there's no federal requirement for any background check for gun transfers between private parties.

This lack of proper, responsible federal regulation of gun ownership has always existed in our country, but it was codified into our Constitution and forced upon state and local governments as well by the Supreme Court's rogue 2008 *Heller* decision. By creating a constitutional obstacle to effective gun control laws, the *Heller* decision and its progeny have ensured that even individuals intent on committing mass shootings will continue to be able to acquire guns with ease.

Surprisingly, the first time I even heard of the Supreme Court's five to four *Heller* decision was the beginning of this school year, when I took a U.S. Government advanced placement class. Prior to that class, I only knew that the Second Amendment provided the "right to bear arms," not that prior to the *Heller* decision, federal courts, including the Supreme Court, had repeatedly ruled that the "right to bear arms" described in the second half of the Second Amendment was linked to service in the "well regulated militia" described in the first half of the Amendment.

Despite my lack of knowledge concerning the Second Amendment prior to the AP class, I still leaned in favor of adopting more stringent gun control laws within the United States, and I cannot pretend as though my mother's experiences hadn't influenced my views against flimsy gun control laws. Upon reading the actual Second Amendment and the *Heller* case court documents, the specific language regarding the link between gun ownership and militia service caused me to realize the Supreme Court's misinterpretation of the Second Amendment in the *Heller* decision as nowhere does the Amendment mention a right to individual firearm use.

The NRA has been so effective in promoting the myth that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns that not only has the majority of current Supreme Court justices endorsed that myth, but our elected leaders and even other gun violence prevention organizations are afraid to challenge it. I agree with Americans Against Gun Violence that the *Heller* decision and its progeny are "literally death sentences for tens of thousands of Americans annually." My own mother almost lost her life as a result of these death sentences.

When our Supreme Court justices and politicians don't have the character and courage to lift these death sentences, then we the people must use our own voices to demand better of them. We must demand that the Supreme Court overturn the *Heller* decision and its progeny and that our elected officials enact stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in all the other high income democratic countries of the world – laws that will prevent anything like the Las Vegas massacre from ever happening again in the United States of America.