

Guns and public safety: Legislators are people, too — and sometimes an issue just hits home

Is this time really different? At the Capitol, signs of hope.

The chanted plea to “keep us safe” from gun violence, raised by 1,000 voices and echoing throughout the State Capitol on Feb. 22, was so earnest that I wanted to believe this time is different. Maybe the Valentine’s Day school shooting in Parkland, Fla., was not just “the next one.” Maybe the determination to make it the last one had reached all the way to St. Paul.

I scanned the rotunda for legislators. A good showing — more’s the point, a bipartisan showing — would be a hopeful sign. Nothing noteworthy can happen in Minnesota’s chronically divided state government unless both parties make it so.

A nest of legislators stood on the speakers’ platform. All appeared to be DFLers. Then I spotted one exception. Republican Rep. Dario Anselmo, the first-term from Edina, was in the mix.

Anselmo posted about the rally on Facebook later that day: “One of the speakers was my aunt Joan, who has been a tireless advocate for gun violence and safety. She told the story of my mother’s tragic death as related to being killed with a gun.”

Then I remembered. Anselmo is the son of Barbara Lund, who was shot to death along with her boyfriend, former Iowa state legislator Kevin Kelly, in her home in August 1992. Lund’s estranged husband, Russell Lund Jr., son of

the founder of the Lunds supermarket chain, was indicted for the murders. He died by suicide before going to trial.

His aunt Joan is Joan Peterson of Duluth, Barbara's sister and a leader in Protect Minnesota, the nonprofit advocacy group that has filled State Capitol corridors three times in the past two weeks with people in orange shirts that read "Minnesotans against getting shot."

On Thursday, when DFL state Rep. Dave Pinto presented his bill for universal background checks before gun purchases to a House committee, he proudly noted that the bill now has bipartisan support. Anselmo had become a cosponsor, Pinto said, nodding to the representative from Edina, who was present though not a member of the committee.

Less than an hour later, Pinto's [bill was tabled](#). Shortly thereafter, the same fate befell his second bill, which would have allowed police or relatives to seek court orders to temporarily prohibit someone from possessing a gun.

Maybe that's it for the year. Or maybe not. One Republican on the committee — another first-termer, Rep. Keith Franke of St. Paul Park — voted with the DFL minority on the background checks bill. With even the Republican president now supporting background checks and high school students in Minnesota and around the country claiming gun safety as their generation's signature issue, Pinto vowed to keep trying.

The conventional analysis would posit that Anselmo and Franke broke with Republican orthodoxy on gun legislation because they both have a tenuous hold on suburban districts that could swing to the DFL in 2018. It would argue that they are exceptions to the Republican rule, and that no one else in their majority caucus will follow suit.

It would be to attribute political motives, and nothing more, to the decisions legislators make.

I want to believe that's not the whole story, either about legislators or about the gun issue. Legislators are real people, informed by their experiences. Gun violence has brushed at least two legislators personally. Anselmo lost his mother; state Sen. Jeff Hayden of Minneapolis lost his sister in 2016.

Anselmo says he likely would not be backing the universal background checks bill but for his family's experience. He also sees gun violence from the perspective of a downtown Minneapolis property owner. He's the former proprietor of the Fine Line Music Cafe. Franke is also in the hospitality business. He's the owner of Park Cafe and Franke's Corner Bar in St. Paul Park.

The gun issue, too, seems to be swelling into something bigger than the perennial partisan wedge it has been for decades. Gun violence is so pervasive — especially when one counts suicides as well as homicides — that many Minnesotans now see it in personal terms. In 2016, more than 38,000 Americans died [gun-related deaths](#).

What's more, a new generation is rising and — even [in rural places](#) — claiming a campaign to stem gun violence as its own. They're recasting the argument in personal and moral terms, asking whether someone else's right to own a semiautomatic weapon should outweigh their right to go to school without being shot and killed.

They're asserting a right to safety. That may not be in the Bill of Rights. But woe be unto any democratic government that fails to secure it.

The demand for safety that has arisen in the wake of the Parkland tragedy may be what will make this time different. Safety is an aim motivating people on both sides of the gun debate. If they can put their culture-war guards down long enough to listen to each other, they ought to find a shared value. On that basis, a consensus on common-sensical measures to stem the bloodshed could have a chance.

Anselmo is a moderate-minded Republican of the old school. He told me last week that he's keen to function as a bridge between the Legislature's conservatives and liberals on a host of issues, this one included. "I'm a 'yes/and' guy. Let's use all the tools that make sense to keep us safe," he said. He's not ready to sign on to Pinto's protective orders bill, though he said he's considering it. He's also open to raising the age and training requirements for gun purchasers.

Despite the setback last week in the House Public Safety Committee, I still want to believe that the political tide is turning in favor of those who want state government to do more to "keep us safe" from gun violence. And that a Republican like Anselmo has an important role to play in making it so.

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