

Testimony of Pastor Brenda K. Mitchell

On “A Public Health Crisis: The Gun Violence Epidemic in America”

United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce

October 3, 2019

Good morning, Chairwoman Eshoo and members of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. It is an honor to appear before you today to tell my story and to testify on gun violence as a public health crisis.

My name is Pastor Brenda K. Mitchell and I live in University Park, Illinois. I have lived and worked in the Chicago area most of my life. Today, I am here as someone who has experienced two family members taken by gun violence: my brother and my son. Today, I am here as a voice for my son. I am here as a voice for my community. I am here on behalf of the hundreds of mothers who have had their children torn from their lives by gun violence.

My son, Kenneth, was the center of our family. He was the first grandchild on both sides of the family and became a role model for his younger siblings and cousins. At the age of 31, he was the single parent of two little boys, and another son who would be born thirty days after his death.

It was Super Bowl weekend and Kenneth was the manager at a golf center in University Park, a suburb of Chicago. He was busy that weekend getting ready for a Super Bowl party he was hosting on Sunday. His boys were with their mother, so Kenneth took the rare opportunity that evening to spend some time with friends at a local sports bar—playing darts and enjoying each other’s company.

As Kenneth was leaving, an argument broke out between two individuals outside of the bar. Kenneth intervened, attempting to diffuse the situation and make peace, when a friend of one of the individuals went to his van and grabbed a gun and started randomly firing into the crowd. Kenneth was struck by a stray bullet and killed.

I got a call in the middle of the night that no parent wants to receive. I was told my son Kenneth had been hurt in a shooting and he was lying at the scene with a sheet over him. I could not tell my husband his son, his namesake--our firstborn child--was dead.

Earlier that day, I distinctly remember feeling so satisfied with my life, and I thanked God for meeting my needs and the needs of my family. I could not ask for anything. Little did I realize that in less than 24 hours our lives would never be the same and I would have to ask God for strength.

After Kenneth’s death I felt for the first time in our lives that my family was dysfunctional. My son was a crime scene, I could not touch him. The pain was so intense that I would not wish this experience on my worst enemy. What was even worse was trying to navigate through it with no resources. I was traumatized with nowhere to go.

Just a week before Kenneth's death, our younger son, Kevin, left for his third tour of duty in Afghanistan. This is the kind of thing that makes a mother worry. I prayed for my other son Kevin and placed him on the altar. In my mind, he was the one who was in danger. I never would have imagined Kenneth would be the one to die from an act of gun violence, right here at home in a free country. After witnessing death firsthand, a week later I brought Kevin back to bury his brother in a free country.

My life shows that trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and grief have lasting effects in the lives of those who are touched by gun violence. However, I learned these terms and their impact on my health and my family over time because the concept of "trauma" had not been spoken of in my community or identified as a root cause. Even if I didn't know what it was called, I know how it felt and I saw the effect it had on my life and the lives of my surviving family members.

I mentioned earlier that my brother died by gun violence. I witnessed my mother mourn my brother who was shot and killed. She could not handle losing her first-born grandson to gun violence after the death of her own son. My mother willed herself out of her pain. She died from a broken heart.

I myself had to leave a successful career because of PTSD and trauma. I lost cognitive memory. I did not know my phone number or the names of people I am very close to. I still struggle to recall the date of my son's death. This is not because that date is not significant to me but because it is a manifestation of trauma.

I almost died three times from extreme hypertension because of the level of stress I was under. I was grieving for my son and raising my grandsons left without their primary parent. I had to look at my youngest grandson who was born 30 days after my son Kenneth's death and know that he would never meet his father. I had to recreate his father for him. There are no words that can communicate the depth of that loss.

We know that 58 percent of American adults or someone they care for have experienced gun violence in their lifetime. Every day, 100 Americans are killed with guns and hundreds more are shot and wounded. Every day there are more mothers like me who mourn for their children. Every day, there are more children, like my grandsons, who learn their parent will never be coming home to love and care for them.

How many young men and women have we lost who will never have the chance to reach their full potential? Every day, there are communities being shattered by the devastation that is this crisis of gun violence. We have children in Chicago who aren't worried about growing up to be a doctor or a lawyer—they are just worried about growing up, period. That reality is unacceptable.

In my own journey, I have come full circle. I identify with the devastation families experience every day in our country and in Chicago. It has become my passion to help others understand how the trauma of gun violence can affect individuals and communities. I have become an advocate for trauma-informed care, and I will do whatever I can to help others, so they don't have to experience what I have gone through.

It is so important for families like mine, who have been so deeply impacted by gun violence, to keep telling our stories. If we keep shining a light on the impact of gun violence, then our

children's deaths will not be in vain. They are still speaking. We are that light that shines in the midst of darkness.

The country is at a crossroads. Americans are demanding action to reduce gun violence, and Congress has an opportunity to do something about it. No one law will stop all gun violence, but there are common-sense, widely supported steps we can take NOW to make our families safer. The House of Representatives is doing its part: It passed a number of bipartisan measures to reduce gun violence--including strong background checks legislation--and I am hopeful the House will soon vote on The Disarm Hate Act, a strong red flag law proposal, and prohibiting high-capacity magazines. The Senate is still refusing to act. It's time for the Senate to do its job and pass background checks on all gun sales and strong red flag legislation and lastly let's begin the narrative around Trauma Informed Care. We are the walking wounded with sore that will never heal.

My story illustrates the price of inaction. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today and thank you for listening to my story. I will answer any questions you may have.