

Testimony of Neil Heslin

Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on the Assault Weapons Ban of 2013

February 27, 2013

My name is Neil Heslin. Jesse Lewis was my son. He was a boy that loved life and lived it to the fullest. He was my best friend. On December 14, he lost his life at Sandy Hook Elementary because of a gun that nobody needs and nobody should have a right to have. I'm here to tell his story. I know what I am doing here today won't bring my son back, but I hope that maybe if you listen to what I say today and you do something about it—maybe nobody else will have to experience what I have experienced.

On December 14, Jesse got up and got ready for school. He was always excited to go to school. I remember on that day we stopped by Misty Vale Deli. It's funny the things you remember. I remember Jesse got the sausage, egg and cheese he always gets, with some hot chocolate. And I remember the hug he gave me when I dropped him off. He just held me, and he rubbed my back. I can still feel that hug.

And Jesse said "It's going to be alright. Everything's going to be okay, Dad." Looking back it makes me wonder. What did he know? Did he have some idea about what was about to happen? But at the time I didn't think much of it. I just thought he was being sweet.

He was always being sweet like that. He was the kind of kid who used to leave me voice messages where he'd sing me happy birthday even when it wasn't my birthday. I'd ask him about it, and he'd say "I just wanted to make you feel happy." Half the time I felt like he was the parent and I was *his* son.

He just had so much wisdom. He would know things, and I would have no idea how he knew. But whatever he said, it was always right. He would remember things we'd done and

places we'd been that I had completely forgotten about. I used to think of him as a tiny adult. He had this inner calm and maturity that just made me feel so much better when I was around him.

Other people felt it, too. Teachers would tell me about his laugh, how he made things at school more fun just by being there. If somebody was ever unhappy, Jesse would find a way to make him feel better. If he heard a baby crying he wouldn't stop until he got the kid to smile. I remember him jiggling keys and standing on his head. Anything to make that crying baby feel better.

Jesse just had this idea that you never leave people hurt. If you can help somebody, you do it. If you can make somebody feel better, you do it. If you can leave somebody a little better off, you do it.

They tell me that's how he died. I guess we still don't know exactly what happened at that school. Maybe we'll never know. But what people tell me is that Jesse did something different. When he heard the shooting, he didn't run and hide. He started yelling. People disagree on the last thing he said. One person who was there says he yelled "run." Another person said he told everybody to "run now." Ten kids from my son's class made it to safety. I hope to God something Jesse did helped them survive that day.

What I know is that Jesse wasn't shot in the back. He took two bullets. The first one grazed the side of his head, but that didn't stop him from yelling. The other hit him in the forehead. Both bullets were fired from the front. That means the last thing my son did was look Adam Lanza straight in the face and scream to his classmates to run. The last thing he saw was that coward's eyes.

Jesse grew up with guns, just like I did. I started shooting skeet when I was eight years old. My dad was a vice president for years at a local gun club. He started taking me shooting

when I was eight. When I turned ten he started taking me hunting. He taught me to respect guns, just like I taught Jesse.

Jesse actually had an interest in guns. He had a bb gun. I watched over him like a hawk with that. I taught him gun safety. He knew it. He could recite it to you. He got it. And I think he would have got what we are talking about today. He liked looking at pictures of army guns, but he knew those weren't for him. Those were for killing people.

Some guns just don't have any place in the hands of civilians. The assault weapons we're talking about today, their sole purpose is to put a lot of lead out in a battlefield quickly. That's what they do. That's what they did at Sandy Hook Elementary. That wasn't a killing; it was a massacre. Those guns and those clips let Adam Lanza massacre those kids. And my son was one of them.

I wish I wasn't here with you today. The best day of my life was the day my son was born. The worst day was the day he died. I don't want to relive that day talking to you here about it. It would be easier for me just to stay home.

But I know that's not what Jesse would do. Jesse died screaming at a man with a gun. He died yelling at the top of his lungs so maybe some of his classmates could get to safety. I'm not going to scream at you, but I hope that maybe I can use my voice like my son used his. Maybe if I make enough noise a few beautiful innocent children like my Jesse won't have to die.

I'm not real political. Half the time I think it doesn't matter which group of you guys runs things out here, no offense. I've always thought it wasn't a real good idea for people to be walking around the streets with military weapons, but I probably wouldn't have said anything about it.

But right now this isn't about politics. The day my son died I was supposed to see him in the afternoon. His mom and I were going to go meet him at school and we were going to make gingerbread houses with his class. I love that stuff, just having that extra time with my kid.

So I guess I was in a pretty good mood when I started to hear about a shooting. And at first I didn't really know what that meant. You know, we all try to look on the bright side. So when I heard about a shooting I thought, maybe it's another town. And then when I heard it was Newtown I thought it probably wouldn't affect me. Even when they said it was a school I figured it was probably a domestic dispute or something. Maybe it was a suicide.

I hate to say it but even when you know your community has been hit you hope and pray it wasn't your boy. They had us all go to a fire station to wait and see if our kids would make it out of the school. By 3:30, maybe 4:00, they told us there were no more survivors. I should have realized. They'd basically told me my son was dead, but I waited. I told the people what to look for, what he'd been wearing that day. He had this striped shirt and Carhartt jacket, and these pants that fit him in September, but then he hit a growth spurt. I gave the description and I waited some more. I waited and I hoped, until 1:30 in the morning. That's when they told me he was wasn't coming.

So the reason I say this isn't about politics is because what I felt on that day, and what I've felt since, doesn't have anything to do with politics. In politics, people like to debate and say if we banned the weapon Adam Lanza used would he have just found something else. But let me tell you, when you're sitting at a firehouse and it's one in the morning and you're hoping against hope that your son is still hiding somewhere in that school, you want any change that makes it one bit more likely you'll see your boy again. If keeping those unnecessary weapons off the street would have let one more of those children leave that school building, it might have been

my Jesse. If Adam Lanza had been able to shoot just one fewer bullet, maybe my son would be with me today.

Before he died, Jesse and I used to talk about maybe coming to Washington someday. He wanted to go up the Washington monument. When we talked about it last year Jesse asked if we could come and meet the President.

I said earlier that I can be a little cynical about politicians. But Jesse believed in you. He learned about you in school and he believed in you. I want to believe in you, too. I know you can't give me Jesse back. Believe me, if I thought you could I'd be asking you for that. But I want to believe that you will think about what I told you hear today. I want to believe you'll think about it and then you'll do something about it, whatever you can do to make sure no other father has to see what I've seen. You can start by passing this assault weapons ban and taking these senseless weapons out of the hands of people like Adam Lanza.

Thank you for listening to my story.