

Written Testimony of Aalayah Eastmond
United States Senate Judiciary Committee
September 7, 2018

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share my experience, and perspectives on gun violence in America. It needs to be a critical part of your consideration for any judge, particularly for the highest court in the land. My view is significantly impacted by my experience as a survivor of gun violence at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida just 6 months ago, and losing my uncle Patrick Edwards 15 years ago in Brooklyn, New York.

My name is Aalayah Eastmond, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. I work across the country to help amplify the voices of young people and particularly young people in communities of color whose day-to-day experience with gun violence is always ignored, mischaracterized, marginalized, and minimized by the press, the public, and the corporate gun lobby.

February 14th. Valentine's day, a day of love and joy. Over 3,000 students and staff members went to Stoneman Douglas on the regular Wednesday, like any other day. Had our random practice fire drill in 2nd period not thinking anything of it. Hearing teachers go over the safety procedures every class because of a safety meeting they attended. Establishing the "safe spot" in their classrooms just in case a shooting were to take place "but it would absolutely never happen here" was always said by some teachers. Teachers informed us about an active shooter drill that would be taking place in a few days, where the swat team would come to school to handle the drill as if it were real.

1:02

4th period, the last period of the day. My Holocaust history teacher Ivy Schamis went over the procedures again. The classroom door was locked today because of the new rules. In the beginning of the period we began presenting our hate group projects that we've been working on. My teacher, Mrs. Ivy Schamis wanted us to be educated on hate groups around the country. Nicholas Dworet was in my group, little did I know, 79 minutes from then he'd be saving my life.

2:21

We heard a round of extremely loud pops. We had no idea what it was or where it was coming from. The class was in complete silence and we all stared at each other in immediate fear. Within a second we heard it again. We all immediately ran. The class split in half. Half of my class ran to the “safe spot” which was out of view from the window in the classroom door. The other half was diagonally across from the window, in complete view. I wasn’t in the “safe spot”. As I sat down I remember telling myself, if I were to get shot anywhere I wouldn’t make it, I needed to get behind something. The only thing in front of me was Nicholas Dworet. Helena Ramsay began passing books down so we could shield ourselves from the bullets, but yet everyone thought it was a drill.

2:22

I clenched the book from Helena and then looked down at my phone to call my mom. As I raised my finger to hit the green call button the loud pops were now in my class. I thought to myself, “what kind of senior prank is this?” as I began to see red on the floor, I assumed it was just a paintball gun. I looked up and saw Helena Ramsay slump over with her back against the wall, I began smelling and inhaling the smoke and gun powder. Then Nicholas Dworet rapidly fell over in front of me. I followed every movement of his body.

When he fell over I fell over with him. I then placed myself underneath his lifeless body. Placing his arm across my body and my head underneath his back. Bullets continued flying. I kept my eyes on the ground so I knew when to hold my breath and close my eye when the shooter got near. I began talking to God. I told God that I knew I was going to die, I asked to please make it fast. I didn’t want to feel anything. I asked for the bullet to go through my head so I wouldn’t endure any pain. I laid there for about 30 seconds still protected by his lifeless body, waiting for the shooter to move onto the next class. After the shooting stopped in my class, his body began to be very heavy, I couldn’t breathe anymore. I rolled him off of me, and placed his head on his arm so he wouldn’t be touching the cold ground. I sat up and looked over. Helena was still in the same exact position I last saw her. I froze, still in absolute view of the window the shooter shot into. Two of

my classmates then pulled me behind a filing cabinet. We were all crammed. Some on the phone with 911, some on the phone with their parents.

I immediately called my mom. I told her my last goodbye, and I told her how much I loved her. I apologized for all the things I might've done in my lifetime to upset her, and the phone hung up. I then called my father, I told him how much I loved him, I told him to tell my brothers I love them, and I said my last goodbyes. I couldn't hear anything they were saying to me but I made sure they could hear me. Not knowing whether it was one shooter or multiple, and not knowing whether they were coming back or not was an unimaginable amount of fear. Sitting behind the filing cabinet waiting to die. I then gave my phone to one of my classmates, Samantha Fuentes, who was shot several times. She took my phone to call her mom and saw her reflection in my phone she began crying. I texted her mom tried to keep her calm. Then I completely panicked. I began hyperventilating, my classmates began breathing with me and trying to keep me calm and quiet. It didn't work, they then covered my face, I felt like I was suffocating but it was to keep me quiet.

Several minutes have passed. "Broward County Police Department" was heard from outside the shattered glass. I thought it was the shooter playing a trick. The classroom door opened "Any injured" I still didn't believe it wasn't the shooter. I looked at my classmate Samantha Grady and said "I am not getting from behind this filing cabinet until you prove to me it's help" she shook her head yes then a swat team member came to check the pulse of Helena and Nicholas. He then looked at me with compassion and said "I know". We all ran out passing bodies in the hallway on the way out.

When I got outside I was completely disoriented. Extremely confused not knowing what to do or where to go. The police then said "He's still on the loose guys, we need you to work with us." I was petrified. I then spotted Samantha Grady, we snuck through bushes to get away from the crowd. We then realize she was shot. I dropped her off at the corner of the sidewalk where the ambulance was stationed. After 2 hours of walking in circles trying to find somewhere for my mom to pick me up I finally saw someone I knew and trusted. My friend and her mother noticed blood on my dress.

Then, they noticed the unimaginable. They called the police over, and they began picking body matter from my hair. I completely broke down. The police took me back on campus to gather photos of me and collect my bloodied dress. They placed me in a chemical suit meant for chemical and biological exposure, then recorded my statement. After, I was transferred to where students and staff members were allowed to be picked up. It was now 8:00 at night. Finally allowed to physically touch my mother. It was absolutely horrific, surreal and mind-numbing. I will never forget what I saw, what I did, and what I experienced that day. I will never forget Nicholas Dworet who, even in death, helped protect and save my life. Days later we received news that my mother would be having a miscarriage because of what the shock of the shooting did to her body. The shooting didn't only impact me on February 14th, it impacts me every day of my life.

I've also lost a family member to gun violence. I lost my uncle Patrick Edwards, shot in the streets of Brooklyn New York. He was shot in the back, the bullet then pierced his heart. He was only 18. With his whole life ahead of him, and evidently that's the same story of thousands of black and brown families across the country. Gun violence disproportionately impacts black and brown youth. Whether that being Police Brutally, Homicides, or Domestic Violence. As for people of color law enforcement is the "shooter" in most cases. History of bias, brutality and racism in so many communities. Like many of brothers and sisters of color, I am not comforted by deputies with handguns, let alone assault rifles. I am very concerned since learning Brett Kavanaugh's views on guns, and how he would strike down any assault weapons ban. Too many dangerous and prohibited people continue to be able to readily access and use dangerous weapons to terrorize Americans at home, work, church, school, concerts, clubs, restaurants, movie theaters, on our streets, and anywhere we go on our day to day life.

Thousands of people across the country are impacted by gun violence. Each of us, different stories but same variable, guns, causing violence everywhere we go. This committee has held many hearings for decades on anti-government, white nationalists, Second Amendment extremists groups, and other domestic terrorists. We all witnessed the hate-mongering displayed in the name of patriotism and

individual rights in Charlottesville Virginia, Charleston South Carolina, Orlando Florida, and several other places in recent years with the surge of hate crimes in America. What is typically their favorite weapon of terrorism? A firearm.

As you consider what to do and who to appoint to make and keep us safer from gun violence, remember my story, remember my classmates who died, remember the communities of color that face mass shootings everyday, remember all victims of gun violence from Parkland, Brooklyn, Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans Birmingham, Miami, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Oakland, and all over America.

As you make your final decision, think about it as if you had to justify and defend your choice to those who we lost to gun violence. If Kavanaugh doesn't even have the decency to shake hands with a father of a victim, he definitely won't have the decency to make life changing decisions that affect real people.

The youth is urging our society to recognize the depth and seriousness of our gun violence epidemic in America. We are all here today with an urgent message for you: if the youth across the country can fight to eradicate gun violence, why can't judges, lawmakers, and Donald Trump understand that young people are dying from this senseless violence?