

NO GUNS IN MY CLASSROOM

by Margot Backus, Department of English, University of Houston

[Note: Here is what I wrote when the UH Campus Carry Working Group was soliciting feedback from all campus stake-holders. However, I would no longer assert that I would quit my job rather than teach in a classroom in which guns are allowed. Much of the activism I most admire could never have gone forward if people had given up when state-sponsored gun-toting was introduced into the equation. The analysis below stands, but my current decision is to stay in the classroom and try to do what I do best. -MB]

My position toward guns and violence evolved early, shaped by nonviolent theorists and practitioners, and later by my experiences as a practitioner of nonviolent disobedience in the anti-nuclear/anti-war movements of the 1980's. Throughout my life my philosophy concerning guns has been consistent: I don't want anything to do with them. My husband, however, grew up in a family that has always owned guns, shot recreationally, and served proudly in the U.S. military. We married knowing we hold different attitudes toward guns, and our differing stances never caused any problems until the day my husband bought a gun.

The day my husband brought that gun into our house, I discovered where I draw the line with guns. I exactly didn't object to his owning one. I didn't object to his teaching our daughter how to shoot one, since she was game. But I will not have a gun in my house. If someone were to force me to accept a gun in my home, clearly it is not my home. I clearly don't have control over that space; someone else does.

This was manifestly true even when the person who wanted to have a gun in my space was a life-partner who has established his sanity and decency and trustworthiness over nearly three decades. He's a wonderful man, and I would have divorced him in a hot minute rather than let him keep a gun in our home because my right to live, sleep, and raise a child in a gun-free home is what defines that home as mine.

This principle also holds true concerning my classroom, but with greater urgency. I know my husband very well; if he were armed in our house, his position of enhanced power would be purely symbolic. This alone is unacceptable — whether or not my husband would actually use a gun to win an argument, guns in my home against my will place me in a newly subordinate position. The same would be true in my classroom; if the state of Texas requires me to accept guns in my classroom, my posi-

tion in the classroom is drastically altered. My authority in the classroom becomes contingent, held unless and until someone else in the room decides that I or someone else in the room constitutes an intolerable threat.

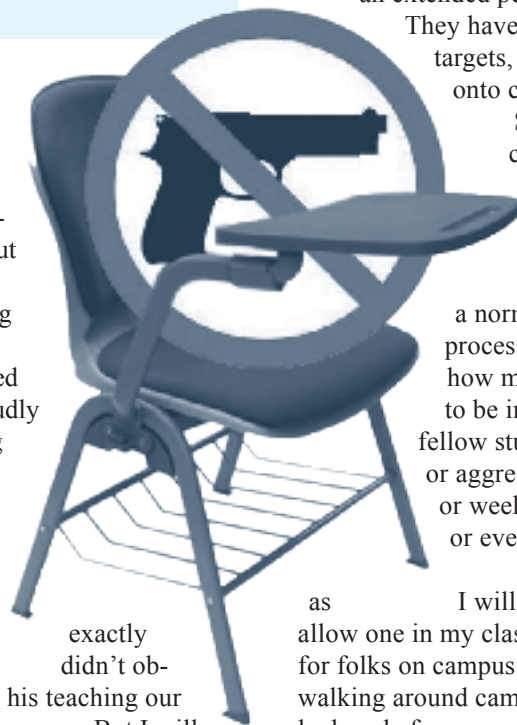
While we have seen many on-campus bloodbaths precipitated by fanatics and mentally ill persons who view society or particular groups as intolerably threatening, until now such slaughters have had to be planned in advance. A person has to be seething with fanatical hatred or desperately mentally ill over an extended period to wind up shooting people on campus.

They have to obtain weapons and ammunition, select targets, and find a way to smuggle these weapons onto campus in order to launch an assault.

Should UH allow concealed guns into the classrooms, offices and labs where highly emotional questions of what constitutes evidence, what constitutes a valid, well-supported argument, and what constitutes excellent, acceptable, or failing work are a normal and indispensable part of the learning process, this would vastly lower the threshold for how mentally ill or fanatical a person would need to be in order to use a gun against staff, faculty, or fellow students. What had required a burst of hatred or aggression capable of being sustained over days or weeks now need only be sustained over minutes or even seconds.

I want nothing to do with this. Just as I will not allow a gun in my home, I will not allow one in my classroom either. If we can work out a means for folks on campus to protect themselves in parking lots and walking around campus while placing their guns securely in lockers before proceeding into the offices, labs and classrooms where heated discussions and debates are the necessary norm, and where the only kind of power that can or should count is the capacity of each individual to back up their arguments with reasoned evidence, then that's fine. I can live with that.

That's how my husband and I worked it out; he has a secure locker outside our house where he can stow his guns. If the University of Houston can and will work out some analogous arrangement with the state of Texas, all is well, or least tolerable, so far as I am concerned. If not, I would view the University of Houston to be making an outrageous and irresponsible alteration to the fundamental conditions of learning on its campuses and to be actively setting the stage for on-campus violence. And just as I was willing to walk away from a happy marriage to protect my right to live in a home without guns, I am, should the need arise, willing to walk away from a dream job, doing work I love with and for the best students I could ever imagine if doing so represents the only way I can avoid teaching in a classroom where guns are permitted.



The Garden Inn, Dallas

by Rachel Jennings

After a day of delays and missed connections, Twilight Zone mix-ups of time and place, my flight arrives in Dallas late this July evening. For a few, Big D is their journey's end, while we in mid-transit trudge to the big van sent by The Garden Inn.

In the dead of night, I see clichés and crime scenes out the bus window: the office building where Kristen shot J.R. on Dallas and the street where Officer Cain killed twelve-year-old Santos in a game of Russian roulette. (He held a .357 Magnum to the back of the boy's head.)

Praise music plays on a Christian radio station. A group sings a new arrangement of "Amazing Grace."

"Yes, grant us grace," I think to myself, smiling, but the voice I hear is Rock Hudson's saying "Ice cream it shall be" in his role as grandfather Bick Benedict in *Giant*.

Grant us grace—if not, at least a US Airways voucher providing a toothbrush, comb, ham and cheese, Dr. Pepper, Fritos. Like the bandito in his bandolier and sombrero, I demand your Fritos. Sarge, too, says, "Fritos it shall be."

Plenty of room, refreshments at The Garden Inn, but what I need more is sleep, so here I stand, God help me, in a lobby cum bar inspired by disco and pop art—a paradise of plastic, chrome, velvet, vinyl.

Two Warhol portraits hang on the wall: Jackie Kennedy, 1964, the canvas, it seems, dipped in lipstick or blood, coupled with John Wayne, Stetson-hatted star of *Rio Bravo*, *Red River*, *The Comancheros*, *The Alamo*. Gripping his revolver, he looks

grim—hellbent on owning Jackie O—O—O.



In Dallas—! Who designed this studio? In '68, I recall, Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol, piercing his spleen, lungs, windpipe, stomach, liver.

"Too droll," says the clerk my angel. I hand him the voucher but in silence beg: "Listen—I am tired of the night, the flashing orange barrel of the gun. Evict me from the Garden. Bounce me from your *Disco Inferno*. Shuttle me out of here. Fly me home."



Gun-toting students scary

Guns in The Classroom

by Joan P. Reese who was an associate professor of English at Collin College for more than a decade.

I was horrified and frightened when I read that Texas legislators are on the verge of granting people the right to carry concealed weapons on college campuses. Can you imagine the carnage that could ensue as the result of untested gun owners attempting to subdue a potential shooter on a college campus?

What are these people thinking? I can't believe that intelligent politicians consider this law to be fundamentally sound.

It is a proven fact, based on research of the brains of young adults, that before the age of 25, certain areas of the brain that deal with effective decision-making are not fully formed. These same young adults tend to make many impulsive decisions that have the potential to end in disaster.

In what way does giving these individuals, along with everyone else from janitors to other professors who want to do so, the right to carry a firearm into my classroom make me "safer"? If Texas legislators pass a law that allows students and faculty to carry concealed weapons on college campuses, I will have no right to deny them in my classroom. Who speaks for me? —Joan P. Reese, Plano