

I'm A Black Female College Professor in Texas. Should I Get a Gun?

I have serious concerns about campus carry.

by Meredith Clark

When I return to the University of North Texas for the fall semester, I'll have no way of knowing who is carrying a firearm. As of August 1, students, faculty, and staff with concealed weapon permits may carry guns on public university campuses, under a law approved last year.

I'm a black female professor working in a Texas town with a prominent Confederate memorial. I teach journalism courses that spark debate about race, gender, and nationality. I have serious reservations about campus carry.

Proponents of the new law claim that if more people are armed at institutions of higher learning, we will all be safer. Days after he signed the bill, Governor Greg Abbott declared that would-be shooters in Texas would now understand that "somebody is going to be watching them and have the ability to do something about it" if they open fire on a college campus.

But I don't feel safer. The idea of working in an environment where anyone may have a gun makes me feel perpetually under threat. I'm afraid of accidents, mostly, but also of misplaced anger and emotional distress. I'm afraid that situations that occur every day on college campuses, like a classroom debate or an office visit about grades, will escalate into a deadly shooting.

My mother wants me to quit. Friends send me job ads in other states. A few high-profile academics — including a University of Texas dean and a professor emeritus — have already made a public show of leaving. But the job market makes it hard for me to consider leaving my first tenure-track position. Even now, while guns are still technically banned from campus, they often show up in campus crime reports. It would be naive to think those incidents won't increase when more permit holders can legally bring their guns to campus.

To be absolutely clear: I am not anti-gun. I have never touched a firearm, though I've long been interested in obtaining a license to own and carry one. I live alone, and I'm often on the road. Having a tool that would allow me an extra measure of protection is attractive. I've also considered carrying a gun as matter of liberation — the kind preached by black militants like Malcolm X and Fred Hampton, who advocated for gun ownership as a means of protecting black bodies like mine from all types of threats.

But I'm unsettled by the notion of entire university communities being motivated by fear to take up arms. I also wonder how people will react to black students, staff, and faculty who choose to arm themselves. It's clear not everyone is so keen on black folks



using guns for self defense. I'm mindful of Marissa Alexander, a black woman who fired a warning shot in her own garage to ward off an attack from her abusive ex-husband. That shot — which injured no one — earned her a 20-year jail sentence in Florida, a state that allows people to "stand their ground" when they cannot escape imminent threat.

The lesson I took from her case? Black women do not enjoy the same privilege of self defense as others.

While I remain ambivalent about guns, I fear that gun violence on campus isn't a matter of what if. It's a matter of when.

Earlier this semester, I thought that day had come.

I'd stepped out of my office for a moment, and when I returned, a student I'd never seen before was perched in one of my chairs. She was a waif with lavender hair and headphones shaped like cat's ears looped around her neck.

"Dr. Clark?" she said.

Her eyes struck me immediately. I can't recall their color, but I remember the jolt of panic I felt when I noticed that her pupils were huge. Dilated. At 8 in the morning.

"I've read about your work, and I wanted to ask you some questions," she said.

She wanted to talk about "what the black community wants," and the protests linked to Black Lives Matter.

I felt the familiar heart palpitations I'd had during my days as a newspaper columnist, when readers from God-knows-where would call and offer their critiques sweetly enough, only to devolve into screaming and swearing, threatening to stop me from writing about all that "black shit."

Any time a stranger — from any background — seeks to engage me about my positions of black existence, I am on guard and prepared to defend myself.

I invited her to sit down.

She was hard to follow. At one point she asked me about racial inequalities then offered her thoughts before I could answer her question.

I began to worry that this young, erratic woman might become violent, and I scanned the room to see what I could grab to defend myself. A picture frame? My computer monitor? Then I felt silly. I was twice her size, but fear of what could happen kept me on edge. As I sat, cornered in my own office, I realized that I'd never been so glad to be unarmed. If I were, I'd have had one hand on my gun.