

PRECIOUS LIFE

FINAL VERSION

Narrator: We sometimes forget, those of us who are young, and even those who are not so young, that life is precious, that we are vulnerable, that we are powerful, and that we can make change. Here are some voices from the Berkeley community, past and present. These voices are witnesses to what has happened and hopeful about what must happen to create a safer school and a safer world.

U. Mr. Rodriguez/Jones/Anderson/Nasser/Williams, I am going to miss class for a few days. I know that it's progress reports coming up, and this is like the most important part of the year so far. So I don't really want to. But did you see the news last night? That story about the guy/that man/that dude/ that woman/ that mother/that father of four/ that college student/ that janitor/ that vendor/ that football player/ that that got shot? In East Oakland? In Richmond? In West Berkeley? In Vallejo? San Jose? San Francisco? That was my uncle/cousin/niece/brother/best friend. We got a lot of grieving to do.
(Round robin)

C: I never expected to attend a party where people were killed. I mean, really. Who does? But after that stupid party in El Cerrito, that party where nobody saw nothing, and nobody heard nothing, and nobody did nothing, and two kids were shot and one was killed, I came back to school on Monday and when I started telling my story, some of my classmates told me that they go to parties like that all the time. All the time! I mean, *really!*

M: I don't even worry about kids with guns anymore. It's the parents I worry about. One teacher asked my class how many of us had guns at home. Soon as she said it, she knew that it was wrong to ask and tried to take back the question before anybody could answer. But it was too late. Half the kids in the room had shot up already. Yeah. (pause) I mean, this is Berkeley. (pause) Are there really *that* many guns in this town?

Q: It was ten years ago. We were seniors! Mighty, mighty seniors. Whoo-whooh! Class of 2003. It was second semester. Just six weeks before graduation. My friend's dad had just gotten out of prison. A boy has a right to see his father so... , his mom, she hands him her car keys. When he gets to where his Dad is staying, his Dad comes out, asks him to pop the trunk, and puts something heavy in there. Anyway, they start driving, they get pulled over, one thing leads to another, and the cops find a loaded gun in the trunk. The cops, they kept him in jail for weeks, all because he didn't want his dad to go back to prison.

His mom was pissed off. One: her car was impounded. Two: she had to pay hundreds and hundreds of dollars to get it back. Three: her son was in jail. Last but not least, she felt that life was just unfair, so she was just pissed off. When she heard that we had talked about this in school, that didn't bother her. But when she heard that half my classmates said that they would do the same thing, that they said they would go to jail for their fathers she turned red. Half of them?, she said. Half of them don't even *know* their fathers. No adult—man or woman—no adult who loves their child would put the kid in that position. Not when graduation was coming in just six weeks and a kid had a chance to do something with his life.

G: I was a freshman at Berkeley High when they found seven guns at my school. I mean, this is Berkeley High, not Castlemont or Richmond High. There's a university right up the street, and a police station right across the street. Everybody's supposed to be so cool. What do we need guns for?

S: Twice in three days recently, dudes pulled guns on people to get their Jordans. The last one was on the Ohlone Trail, the one that leads to Berkeley. I love my Jordans. They are cool. They are like turquoise and orange. Who'd thunk those colors would look so good together, kinda like a Reese's peanut butter cup for your feet. A combination that shouldn't go together, but does. Who'da thunk it? I have maybe five outfits that match those shoes, but if some guy pull a gun on me, he can have them shoes. Man, I'll even lace 'em up for you.

A: I was featured on the Channel 2 News in 2011 after my three year old was shot in his stroller in East Oakland. I should feel safe when I'm taking my kids to and from school... but I don't. I'm not. My old English teacher was so proud of me when he saw me on TV. He even called me articulate, a word he never used about me when I was in his class. But I wasn't articulate. I was fucking pissed off... and scared. I am a mother/father now.

W: I ran into my friend's grandfather after he was shot. He was putting up posters at the BART station asking if anybody knew anything about his grandson's death. He said: I'd like to come up to that school and ask those kids what they know, because I can't forgive them right now. I'll never be able to forgive them. Not until I know what happened. I know that kids make mistakes. All kids make mistakes. I was a kid once. Hell, I'm 50 years old now, and I'm still making mistakes, but I know it's an awfully big burden to carry around something like that. I'm ready to forgive, but I'm not ready to forget. I need to forget his death so I can remember his life. But I can't remember the good things about my grandson until I know what happened.

AA: I was from Eritrea, and I loved Berkeley High. And everybody loved me! What could you not love about me. I'm handsome, intelligent, college-bound, daring... A teacher told me that word—daring--in

my EL class and I wrote it down this little spiral notebook I keep in my back pocket. I loved homecoming and being a senior, (I especially loved it because I loved being LOUD. I would shout it from the rooftops. Life is wonderful in America. So, of course, I loved Thanksgiving until the day my sister's husband destroyed any chance I had at a future. My classmates made a picture book about my life and raised money to bury me in my homeland.

E: I go to Longfellow with my sister, and while we didn't have no Columbine or Sandy Hook, my mama was pissed off when they found that lady dead on Sacramento Street. I mean we walk down that street every day—even after dark. And Longfellow is a good school, a very good school.

I: We had English, History, Math and PE together. He was quiet, but, when he did talk, it was usually something funny. He was a little guy. He loved video games and skateboards and had attended Berkeley schools from the beginning. This little guy called himself a "veteran." I remember thinking, 'A veteran of what?' before I figured it out. Then his best friend shot and killed him in April, playing with a gun at his house. In three different classes, I sat next to his empty chair... a holdover from the beginning of the year when we sat together by last name. Except his seat wasn't always empty. Some people would sit there and doodle on the desk. Some people dropped little notes on the chair, like they expected him to answer them. We were ninth graders, *you* know. Finally, one teacher taped a piece of construction paper on the desk and let everyone write notes or draw on it. Some people wrote long notes, like they expected him to read them. But I only wrote three letters: (slow) RIP. That was the year I grew up—fast. The boy that shot him, his best friend, he was never the same. Of course, none of us were.

K: Some of my friends have whole drawers full of t-shirts with faces and dates on them. When they open the drawer, it's like opening a graveyard. How could they wear those shirts?

N: My dad says there was no such thing as anger management when he grew up.... That I need to learn to control my temper. Well, that was a long time ago, I mutter under my breath. I would never say that to his face. He gets hot really easy. I mean, easily.

O: I was a kid then. I think it was five or six years ago right here in Berkeley. How could anything like that happen here? This is a city of peacelovers and protests. A man threw a party for his niece; it was on a Saturday. It was a birthday party for eighth graders, for little kids. We were little and we were young. Anyway, some older dudes—not kids at all, some grown ass little men—wanted to join in the fun. My friend's uncle told them to go away. He told them: these girls ain't had their periods yet. We laughed. Those guys came back ten minutes later in a car. And they shot him! Nobody should die like that. Nobody should lose their innocence that way.

P: Now they want to arm the teachers. Ain't *that* a bitch! That's all we need now. Teachers packing guns at school. Have you ever seen Ms. Tammer get mad? Mr. Dohrer? Mr. Carton? Ms. Jones? Every one of them could be a maniac, anyone of them, at any time. Would you trust any one of them with a gun? I would not want to be called up to the desk of some teacher asking me: Do you really want to act out today Mr. Brown, or should we just have a Second Amendment solution?

H: When she heard about all that shooting in Berkeley, my mama said she was gonna check her gun... even after I told her that she was more likely to kill one of us than any perpetrator. She said, Baby I'm trying to keep yall safe. I shook my head. Then she told me to shut up. Just like that. And I did. You know I did.

F: I was in class after lunch with my friend. We had been in school together since kindergarten. She had been saying all morning that she was gonna kill this other girl. She kept saying it and she kept saying it. Then she showed me the gun in her backpack. Right in the middle of Fourth Period. I had never seen one before. I'm glad I told the teacher, and I'm glad she told the Safety Officer, and I'm glad I got the hell out of that room alive. It doesn't always happen that way.

D: When I attended BHS, I was really immature, you know, just young and dumb. But we didn't know how dumb. We were cheerleaders. Haha! I thought it was fun the first time we went to that party. That guy pointed his gun at us, making little green dots on our forehead with the pistol. I thought, "Hey, that's the price of admission for a party like this—a party with free drugs and free booze, and fine guys. I mean 'Fine!'" One month later, I went there again with my girl (You know, it's funny; I don't even remember her name) but I won't forget Yaheem putting himself between us and the gun. I didn't even know him really. A week later I learned that he would have been the first of like eight kids in his family to graduate from high school. I will never forget him. He saved my life.

Y: My classmate had a scholarship to Fresno State. Man, he was juiced. He had a long list of gonnas. He was gonna play basketball. He was gonna get out of Berkeley. Gonna do this, gonna do that, gonna do something with his life. Then... Something happened with his baby mama, something he thought he could fix with a gun. He brought that gun... and his history in juvie.... *and* his recent eighteenth birthday to that dude causing the trouble. Two years later, after two years in prison, my friend can't *even* get a job, everybody treats him like a thug, when all he was trying to do was protect his baby and the mother of his child. If he had left that gun at home, he would have a different life today. Life is precious.

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Alan E. Miller

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