Pull the Trigger: Students Stick to Their Guns

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Four blasts echoed through Ames 30 minutes before midnight on Saturday, March 9. The noise fired from the barrel of a revolver during a disagreement between two minors in the parking lot of Zeke’s, less than a mile west of campus on Lincoln Way. The shots were heard by Ames Police officers who “observed several people fighting in the parking lot and running from the area,” according to a press release from the Ames Police Department. After interviewing people at the scene, officers took the minors to juvenile court for carrying a concealed weapon, reckless use of a firearm and disorderly conduct.

Ames Police Investigations Commander Geoff Huff says that the shots weren’t fired at anyone in particular and no injuries were reported.

Even though the minors were from out of town, the scare they caused isn’t necessarily uncommon in Ames. “We probably get a report of shots fired maybe once every week or two weeks and most of the time we never figure out what that noise was,” Huff says. Fireworks, backfiring cars or even hunters can provoke such reports, but Huff says Ames police occasionally respond to homicides where guns were fired or find evidence suggesting shots were indeed fired. “Ames is a relatively safe town to live in, but we get everything that a big city does, just not as much of it,” he says.

Twenty-nine percent of Midwesterners own a gun, making it second to the South for regional gun ownership in the U.S., a recent Gallup poll revealed. Huff explains that a strong hunting presence and the region’s relatively low violent crime rates contribute to Midwesterners having a more relaxed attitude toward guns. “When you hear about someone having a weapon in a big city you’re going to automatically assume the worst about it, where we don’t necessarily do that,” he says.

When the language of the Iowa Code changed from “may issue” to “shall issue” carry permits on Jan. 1, 2011, the number of non-professional weapons permits issued spiked dramatically statewide. In Story County alone, the number more than quadrupled in 2011, the latest data available in the Story County Sheriff’s Office Annual Budget Report, though the Iowa Department of Public Safety predicts that the number of permits issued will taper off because of their five-year validity. Despite more residents having weapons permits, Huff says that problems with guns are usually caused by those who possess them illegally.

Even though guns aren’t permitted on Iowa State’s campus or any of its property, the Midwestern gun culture is very much present in its students. Those who went through the appropriate legal processes have their own reasons for owning guns. Many were raised in the presence of firearms, whether they went hunting with relatives, have parents in the police force or grew up with a reason to fear for their safety.
A car packed with angsty teenagers, 30 to 40 pounds of marijuana and 10 to 15 pounds of cocaine sits outside a run-down gas station on the South Side of Chicago. A scruffy, desperate-looking man approaches the teens with a gun: cocked, loaded and ready to fire.

“Y'all need to get out of the car right now,” the man says.

The teens stare down the barrel of his gun without fear; having been in this situation before they expected nothing less. Without hesitation, the front seat passengers pull out their own guns, lay their finger on the triggers, aim and prepare to retaliate. The man saw his defeat and fled, leaving the teenagers to survive another day.

Joining a gang at 13 years old is not a choice willingly made. For John*, a current Iowa State student and driver of the car that day, there was no other option. Without support from his parents or a stable home, John had to turn to gang membership and drug trafficking to protect himself.

“My dad left when I was really little and my mom ... she just kind of did her own thing ... I was the kind of kid who could stay out all night and my mom just didn’t really care,” John says. “It got to the point where I had to buy my own groceries ... I couldn’t really keep up anymore—I couldn’t really feed myself, so I had to [sell drugs] to get whatever sort of money I needed.”

Which is exactly what he was doing that night in Chicago. According to John they couldn’t just forfeit the car filled with drugs to the armed man; they needed to return that stash to their gang leader and collect the relatively small portion of income they earned. Either they would die at that moment from a gunshot wound (from whom John suspects was a crackhead wanting the car), or they would suffer the consequences upon returning empty handed.

In a neighborhood where it isn’t uncommon to get shot at on the way home, stabbed in a gang fight or harassed for wearing the wrong color of clothing on the wrong side of town, it didn’t seem out of the question to own and carry a weapon. In fact, it wasn’t abnormal to own a gun at that age in that town, much less carry it to school. According to John, at least six out of 10 kids in his high school carried guns, and if they felt threatened, they weren’t afraid to use them.

John was walking home, just mere blocks away, when he heard the echoing ring of gunshots. It didn’t take long for him to realize the shots were meant for him and his friends, or to quickly react by revealing his own weapon. Shots fired between the two groups, resulting in an ear-splitting cacophony of gunfire. It was fight or flight for the group and they weren’t afraid to fight.

“It didn’t faze me or anybody with me to shoot back. That was really our only choice ... it was either shoot back or get shot,” John says. “A lot of [the] times we actually had to use our guns it wasn’t really a choice ... it was a matter of survival.”

Leaving a gang isn’t as easy as leaving a job or transferring schools; you can’t just quit. When John decided he no longer wanted to be part of the gang, he had to get out quickly and quietly.

John ran, “ran like a bitch.”

He didn’t tell anyone; not his friends, family or teachers. He didn’t try to “fight back the system of getting out,” he just left. When he saw his chance, he took it and came to Iowa State.

Since leaving the gang and his hometown, John has been working to move on from his previous lifestyle toward a better future. He rarely goes home, and when he does, it’s a short visit—he never stays the night. He says that even today, if any member of the gang saw him, they would probably try to attack him.

As of now, John owns two guns: a 12 gauge Remington 870 shotgun for home defense and a .38 revolver handgun for personal defense, which he doesn’t have a permit to carry. He plans to buy an assault rifle for further protection in the near future.

Due to his earlier experiences, he still feels the threat of someone breaking into his house, which is why he keeps guns in his home and never keeps them in the same place for long—a gun safe, closets, under his bed and occasionally in his car. If he could, he said he would carry his weapons on campus.

“Here, I don’t feel [fear] as much because I know those people don’t have the resources nor the desire to really come out here and make something of it,” John says. “But, to go home is a scary thing ... I really just can’t go home.”

*Name has been changed.
Ben Schneider remembers his first kill as if he pulled the trigger yesterday. On an early morning in April—the beginning of the turkey-mating season—his uncle caught the attention of three male turkeys with the soft cooing of his box call, luring them to the decoy hen strategically placed about 30 feet from their perch. Sitting on a large hill beside a lone oak tree just outside St. Donatus, Iowa, the two had spent the morning listening to 20 or so turkeys gobble, watching them fly out of their roosts in the surrounding trees. “These male turkeys are so loud and when they make this gobble, it reverberates through your entire body ... it makes your intestines shake and your heart just starts pounding, it’s just the coolest sound you ever heard in your entire life,” Schneider explains.

It seemed the toms had all found hens until the group of three loners came into view. Schneider knew it was his chance. The sun began rising while he sat as still as he could, peering through his binoculars at the three toms running toward him, fans on full display, wings spread and bodies ballooned out. When the birds got within 50 feet of his position, he set his binoculars down, and picked up his 20 gauge Mossberg shotgun as his uncle told him to take the turkey on the right, the biggest of the three. His body shaking, he held his gun on his knee trying to steady his shot. He knew he had to aim for the head—turkey’s feathers deflect bullets, which he learned the hard way the day before when he shot but only stunned a bird that ended up flying away. When the bead of his scope was centered on the bird’s white head, a wave of adrenaline ran through his body as his finger began to tighten on the trigger. Heart pounding, ears ringing, he felt like all of the blood in his body was rushing to his head; a high he hadn’t felt before. Pulling the trigger, his shotgun let out a loud POP. His turkey fell to the ground, the other two made a run for their lives and he knew that hunting was his newfound addiction.

Growing up along the Mississippi River in Bellevue, Iowa, Schneider first went duck hunting with his uncle at age 5. Back then, he was an observer, the designated retriever of his father’s kills. His father bought him his first weapon at age 12—the Mossberg shotgun that he got his first kill with a little later, when he was 13.

Today the senior in animal ecology owns 12 guns and each has its own purpose. A light and short 20-gauge shotgun for stalking animals on foot; a heavier and longer 12-gauge shotgun for ambushing wandering prey; a .270 rifle for shooting long range at animals like coyotes; and his .50-caliber muzzleloader—his pride and joy. The camo-clad weapon is the most precise one in his collection. It helped him bring down a 9-point buck that scored 136 points on the Boone and Crockett scoring system, the largest he’s ever killed.

He hunts as much as he can year-round and has never spent a VEISHEA weekend in Ames because it conflicts with turkey season. Instead he returns to the 40 acres his father owns—and that he maintains for the animals who call it home—where he creates memories he knows he’ll always remember with whoever will join him.

Some days he sits silently in his stand, not taking a single shot. “If I don’t have a shot on an animal I’m not going to take it; it lives,” he says. These are some of his favorite days and just seeing animals in their natural environment can get him the adrenaline fix he’s always after. He’s never been one to shoot whatever he sees, he has too much respect for mother nature. Still, he hasn’t had to buy meat from a store for six or seven years.

A self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie, he’s always trying to get others hooked on this natural high, even if they’ve never hunted before. “There [are] so many students here that were born in the city and they never got to experience the outdoors the way that I have,” he says. He loves to take new people out and see them shake as their adrenaline rushes like his did during his first kill. For this reason, he’s in the process of trying to start a hunting club at Iowa State, to promote safe, professional and ethical hunting practices and to give more students the chance to find a connection with nature like the one that he has and cherishes.
As the sun sets behind snow-covered trees that hide Izaak Walton League Park tucked away between Duff and Dayton Avenues, just north of Lincoln Way, ear-piercing cracks fill the silence of a cold Thursday night in March.

“Pull,” Kyle Nerad, junior in civil engineering and member of the ISU Trap and Skeet Shooting Club calls out. Club treasurer and sophomore in agricultural engineering Jacob Christensen pushes a button and a single clay pigeon sails through the air away from the group.

BANG.

What seems like a second later, the same call comes again. “Pull.”

BANG.

His targets make no sound as they shatter to pieces and rain back down to earth, but after nailing his last two, Nerad lets out audible exhale that’s as visible as the smoke rolling from the barrel of his shotgun. Once the three other shooters take their two shots at the soaring targets, they rotate positions, moving about four feet right to the next zone.

This group is practicing trap, while another group of seven is shooting skeet about 200 feet to the right. Club membership is at an all-time high, says president Jon King, senior in mechanical engineering, with members coming from a variety of majors at Iowa State. It’s not just men either—eight women are included in the club’s 53-member roster.

Each member comes out for their own reasons. Some hunt, others just like to compete, but...
only the die-hard come out to practice their marksmanship in the cold, King says. This explains why only 18 members made it out to this week’s meeting on the snowy, slushy evening.

Most members bring their own guns to practice with. King personally owns between five and 10 guns and usually shoots with his Caesar Guerini rifle. A problem that some members run into is storing their guns, which aren’t allowed on University property or in Greek houses. When the weather’s warm the club attends meets almost every weekend, traveling to various locations between Kentucky and Wyoming. They have to drive their own vehicles since their guns aren’t allowed in University vehicles either. Fortunately, they have a deal with the Sports Club Council, the governing body of sports clubs at Iowa State, to get their entries fees paid for since they personally pay their travel expenses. Another caveat in the club’s funding is that no money from it’s University account can be spent on firearms and ammunition, though they do have club guns members can use that are owned by the University.

“We’ve had people who’ve never held a gun before,” King says, explaining that they’ve had to teach some newcomers how to properly handle a firearm. “It’s difficult, especially in this area of the country, not to have any experience with guns, but it does happen.”

King’s father taught him the importance of gun safety at an early age, which he strives to instill in all new club members. By the time he was big enough to hold a 12-gauge—around age 13 or 14—he really got into the sport of shooting. Nowadays he’s the owner of a concealed carry permit, partakes in as many trap and skeet competitions as he can, and hunts. He and his father also compete in a handgun league in Ankeny, where they fire at targets while navigating an obstacle course.

King and the rest of the club’s members benefit from it’s competitive aspect, whether they’re competing with themselves or others. “We love to hit that one extra bird or target than our buddy at least,” he explained.

Being a recreational club with an emphasis on safe firearm handling and practices, the club hasn’t had any accidents. King explains that through education, guns can be made safer. He believes this is a better alternative to placing restrictions on guns and who can own them. “I’m all for making the world safer, but I don’t think that limiting law-abiding citizens is the way to do it,” he says.