
Parkland Activism: Teens Embrace 'The Power of the Moment'

Date : March 15, 2018

On Wednesday, March 14, 2018, high school students across the U.S. walked out of school to protest gun violence, staying out of class for at least 17 minutes to honor each victim in the deadly shooting on February 14 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. It was the latest show of activism in what could best be called a student-led rebellion against existing gun laws and the national epidemic of school violence.

For many teens, this experience has been their first exposure to true activism on a broad scale – and unifying to be speaking up and stepping out for classmates that perhaps they have never even met, but with whom they feel a certain kinship.

“No matter the motivation for different people to walk out, Wednesday was a way of showing our solidarity against the issue of gun violence and school shootings, as well as a way to commemorate the lives of the students lost from Parkland,” said Julia Drake, a senior at Hopewell Valley Central High School in Pennington, N.J., U.S. “We trekked over the snow covering the turf field to listen to passionate speeches that some students had prepared, and we had a moment of silence for each of the 17 victims. I kept holding up a sign for Luke Hoyer, Age 15, even when my wrist went numb from the cold wind. I think this is an incredibly empowering time for teenagers to be able to express their opinions on issues like gun violence, especially with the huge platform of social media. When we see students who survived the Parkland shooting voicing their frustration and anger over the lack of effective gun regulations, we feel inspired to unite with them in our shared anger over the amount of innocent lives lost already, and to show our support. It has awakened a pride and a hope in my generation.”

Aneesh Shinkre, a senior at Allen D. Nease High School in St. Augustine, Fla., U.S., felt a similar sense of solidarity with his classmates, but he chose to not participate in Wednesday’s activities. “As someone who tries to respect all beliefs and sides before taking one, I couldn’t really comprehend what the walkout was trying to accomplish,” said Shinkre. “I know answers like “no more gun violence!” and “no more school shootings!” may sound great in theory, but I think many teens are forgetting the bigger picture. In my opinion, if we really want to take action, our society should focus on the violence behind the gun — not the gun violence. Instead of politically protesting gun violence, why don’t we protest bullying, depression, mental health, and access to better resources for those seeking help? We can put an end to this not by walking out of class, but rather by being more supportive parents, classmates, mentors, friends, neighbors and role models. The law isn’t what’s going to save society from mass shootings: It’s how we treat each other with respect, love, dignity, and support. It’s only until people in our society can start looking out for each other that we won’t have to see, hear, or think about a depressed, lonely, and troubled gunman making headlines ever again.”

Drake and Shinkre represent the vocal and thoughtful perspectives inherent in the groundswell of activism and emotion taking hold of high school students nationwide. Few can argue that something seems different since the massacre last month in Parkland, Fla. After the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School that took 17 lives, public outrage took an unexpected turn. Rather than fading, the resolve intensified. It began to take concrete form in action, with students staging protests and walkouts like the one this week. Several major corporations ended their relationships with the National Rifle Association, and large retail chains announced plans to limit sales of firearms.

Parkland’s influence has been greater and lasted longer than reverberations from the shootings at Sandy Hook, Las Vegas or Orlando. Businesses responded quickly and decisively. Why? It has to do, in part, with who the victims and survivors are.

“What we are seeing here is the power of social media, because these kids are old enough to be in the generation of

digital natives who know how to work the power of their networks,” says Wharton marketing professor Americus Reed. “That, plus the fact that there is a general trend of consumers asking what companies stand for. It never used to be that you would ask the CEO and CFO and COO these kinds of questions, and now part of the job is to stand up and be the face that says these are our values, this is what we stand for, and this is why we do what we do.”

The Parkland shooting has created an inflection point, says management professor Michael Useem, director of Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. “It is creating one of those sometimes-hard-to-really-get-your-hands-around sea changes in how we think about the world,” he noted. “It feels to me irreversible and I think for the first time, policy toward gun control, gun use and access to automatic weapons is now such a threshold issue that everybody from gun makers to food distributors is being pressed to make a case one way or the other.”

The power of the moment stems not only from who the victims were, but also the timing of the shooting, says Steven Jay Berkowitz, University of Pennsylvania professor of clinical psychology and director of the Penn Center for Youth and Family Trauma Response and Recovery. “This shooting occurred at a school with a high-functioning group of families, and they are smart kids, and I think whatever the current zeitgeist is with the #MeToo movement also changed the playing field,” says Berkowitz, who has written widely about gun violence and its lasting trauma.

“One of the things that was quite different about this than Sandy Hook was that it was the parents at Sandy Hook making the effort,” he noted. “This time it’s directly the survivors who are making the effort, and they are the next generation that corporations and others are going to want to include in their thinking and marketing plans. That confluence of factors and the fact that they are old enough to espouse their views and be articulate about it has really made a difference.”

Berkowitz points out that some of the surviving students at Sandy Hook Elementary are also high school students today, “so this is now a generation that, unfortunately, has really been exposed to this, and they are worried and afraid, and rightfully so, and they are taking it upon themselves to become active. And it’s had a lot of influence.”

Reed says these elements are “creating this interesting watershed moment in terms of never-before-seen traction.” But, he adds: “Whether it translates into policy changes, that’s a different question.”

The Snowballing Business Reaction

Just moments after the murders of 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, a corps of surviving students took to social media. But their #NeverAgain organizing prowess quickly went well beyond the digital realm. They lobbied state lawmakers in dozens of meetings, organized rallies, inspired walkouts at other schools, participated in a CNN town hall and have drawn six-figure donations to their cause from the likes of Oprah and George and Amal Clooney.

They have also worked the mainstream media like pros. In interviews on national television, they have been remarkably poised and persuasive. What has given their message extra power, though, is a certain first-person credibility, closing the distance on a policy question by being personally connected to it. In that regard, the gun-regulation drive has something in common with the same-sex marriage movement, which, following decades as a dead issue, also gained a sudden traction. Said Berkowitz of the Parkland students: “They made it humanizing, so that adults and others said, ‘That’s what I’d like my kid to be able to do.’ And that’s what has happened with many of these social movements. Because of the humanizing aspect of it, you can’t ignore your gay neighbor or your gay cousin, nor can you ignore high school kids that can tell you what they experienced in these horrific incidents.”

Businesses were quick to feel the heat to say where they stand on the question of guns in America. Very soon after the Parkland shooting, several companies distanced themselves from the NRA — something that has not happened before,

according to many observers. First National Bank of Omaha said it would not renew a contract to issue a NRA-branded Visa card. United Airlines, Hertz, Avis, Allied Van Lines and others ended their discount programs for NRA members, though they have been noticeably reticent about saying why.

Business and politics have never been strangers. Useem says it has always been the case that the CEO is responsible for knowing the mayor, the governor, the legislature and other leaders. What's different now, he says, is that the environment is becoming more political and partisan, and "I think we are going to see the chief executive and the senior vice president for communications and many people in the C-Suite that are going to have to spend more time on how to position the firm."

Businesses "have been stepping up around all sorts of issues that matter to stakeholders, and this is an obvious one for them," says Christopher C. Geczy, an adjunct finance professor at Wharton and academic director of both the Wharton Wealth Management Initiative and the Jacobs Levy Equity Management Center for Quantitative Financial Research. The motivation is not necessarily only virtuousness. "We always have to remember that, unless companies specifically are organized around stakeholder benefit, they have the bottom line in mind when they are doing this," he says.

The decision by Dick's Sporting Goods to no longer sell assault-style rifles or high-capacity magazines, and to raise the minimum age for gun purchasers to 21, was perhaps the most prominent reaction by a business, and its CEO was quite specific about the reasons for it. "When we saw what happened in Parkland, we were so disturbed and upset," Edward Stack told the *New York Times*. "We love these kids and their rallying cry, 'Enough is enough.' It got to us."

It also might have helped that the gun-violence issue was somewhat personalized for Stack. He said the company had determined that the alleged Parkland shooter, Nikolas Cruz, bought a gun at a Dick's store (though apparently not the gun or type of gun used in the attack). Stack went well beyond steps taken by other CEOs. He "implored" lawmakers to take up "common sense" gun reform and urged other companies to follow his lead. Hours after Dick's announcement, Walmart followed suit, and then others. Late last week, outdoor retailers REI and Mountain Equipment Co-op announced that they would no longer sell products, including CamelBak water bottles and Bell bicycle helmets, made by Vista Outdoor, which also owns a gun manufacturing business.

Some called the move by Dick's and others canny ones, an investment in the customer of tomorrow, since younger Americans are generally more likely to support gun control than older ones. But it's not at all clear that younger generations will remain less enamored of guns than their parents or grandparents.

A majority of 18- to 29-year-olds polled by the Pew Research Center — 58% — said in an April 7, 2017, survey that they supported gun control, which is indeed significantly more than the 44% of Americans ages 50-64 who said they supported gun control. But looking at analogous data from nearly a quarter of a century earlier, the spread has not changed much. Pew figures from 1993 show that 64% of 18- to 29-year-olds supported gun control, with 55% in the 50-to-64-year-old group supporting it.

The question posed by Pew, though — "What do you think is more important: to protect the right of Americans to own guns, OR to control gun ownership?" — may not be picking up on subtle shifts in the public's increasing sophistication to differentiate among various solutions: for instance, the willingness to generally support gun-ownership rights while still wanting to see certain changes in gun regulations.

AR-15s Off the Streets

Regardless of the companies' motivations, many are pleased to see business overtly co-mingling with social causes. "Let's not pretend it wasn't opportunistic. Are companies doing this in the service of some moral stance, or are they doing it in service of an economic argument? It's hard to know the answer to that," says Reed. "But at a certain level,

I'm not sure I actually care. If that gets AR-15s off the street and bump stocks and certain classes of firearms banned and not allowing mentally ill people to walk into gun shows and buy a gun without a permit, then I'm OK with it."

But for others, the morality of guns is one thing, making money another, and never the twain shall meet. Berkshire Hathaway chairman and CEO Warren Buffett called the idea of his firm no longer doing business with gun manufacturers "ridiculous," saying he would not impose his personal views on Berkshire's business decisions or investment criteria.

Part of the influence of the current gun-regulation movement comes by way of being spontaneous and grassroots. The students in Parkland are organizing a March for Our Lives protest in Washington, D.C., on March 24, and companion marches are popping up in other cities on that date.

But how will the movement sustain momentum? "I think that the next step for them will be to mobilize other students, which seems like it's happening," says Wharton management professor Mary-Hunter McDonnell. "Walkouts in solidarity, that is the real next step. It needs to move beyond this one school in Florida. It's very vivid in the public's mind that this happened to these students, but it will be more effective if students everywhere are participating and hammer home the point that it could happen anywhere."

The tack Parkland activists are taking is a course observed long ago by Philadelphia city planner Edmund N. Bacon: When the people lead, the leaders will follow. But today's news cycle moves fast, and while there's no doubt that public conversation around gun regulation has picked up surprising steam this time around, the question of whether voters are finally ready to re-evaluate the place of guns in America remains an open one. Many wonder whether the conversation will even retain its intensity through the mid-term elections.

"I think one sign that has already occurred is the fact that it hasn't just been the kids in Florida protesting. It has spread," says Berkowitz. "I also think we'll see what happens on March 24 — when the March for Our Lives protest is planned for Washington, D.C., and other cities — for one of the signs of whether this really is a national movement. But so much of our history of social change in this country has come from the youth movement, and one way of thinking about it is that it comes in 50-year cycles. Vietnam galvanized a youth movement. This is analogous. This is our teenagers' Vietnam in many ways."