

In the late spring of 1973, my childhood friend, Tom, was killed by a drug addict, wielding a gun. Tom was killed on the street where he lived. He had just withdrawn a small amount of cash to pay his rent. It was a fine spring day. He was killed in broad daylight, walking along the sidewalk with his roommate. The roommate heard the gunman say to Tom, "Give me your money." He heard a surprised Tom say, "Are you kidding?" Those were my friend's last words.

Tom and I were both born in Manhattan, to Manhattan born and bred parents. Although both our families eventually moved to look alike houses in the suburbs, we were entirely comfortable in the city. But when we each returned to live on the West Side of Manhattan in the early 1970s, the NYC we returned to was a far more dangerous place than it had been in the '60s when we graduated from high school. Drug use (and abuse) was omnipresent. It crossed class, ethnic and racial boundaries. Likewise, robberies, both burglaries and muggings were all too common... sometimes a desperate junkie, sometimes an "old fashioned" cat burglar... and there were more guns on the street.... our bikes were stolen... our car's tires were ripped off... the unlucky were "mugged" and robbed of their cash and jewelry. We always had our ears tuned to footsteps behind us as we approached our apartment houses at night, our heads reflexively turning to look behind us. We knew street crime was at an all-time high, but we chose to live there and, perhaps, because we'd grown up in a safer city, we thought knew how we would stay safe.

Then Tom was killed in an encounter with the junkie with a gun, his murder took less time than it would take to boil an egg. It was shocking, dreadful, beyond imagining. Now, more than 40 years since his death, it's hard for me to understand how his parents and siblings and his many friends managed to carry on. But they did and we did, and most of us became outspoken advocates for drug treatment and gun control. And in fact, NYC did tighten up its gun laws and the murder rate in NYC has dropped so dramatically that to imagine what happened to Tom on that West Side St. near Central Park is to imagine the improbable. But just as improbably, during these past 40 years, guns and gun violence in most of America has escalated!

I agreed to offer this story from the perspective of 40 years, because as much as things have changed since Tom died in the city we grew up in, gun violence still has a powerful hold on American streets, and schools and homes. I am telling this story to honor Tom and all the lives lost senselessly, in Washington, in Philadelphia, in Boston, over and over and over again, over so many years. And I'm telling this story because Mother's Day, a day when we celebrate the lives of mothers and their children is approaching.

Last year I walked with Follenites and thousands of others to honor the lives of children lost to violence in the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute's Mother's Day Walk. I will walk again this year. I walk with others who have made a commitment to end the violence, a commitment to peace. Through the years the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute's Mother's Day Walk has become a way to morally and financially support this work of re-making an America where guns and gun violence are no longer commonplace, where no one fears to walk along a quiet street by day or night.

Betsy Leutz