

Rural group ends gun shows

BY MELISSA CHANDLER

In January 2001, Laura Wilcox, 19, of rural Nevada County, and three others were killed in a shooting rampage by a mentally ill client of the clinic where they were working. The local paper reported that the gunman owned guns he had bought illegally at gun shows. Within two years, a group of local residents, including Laura's parents, had eliminated gun shows from Nevada County.

At a gun show one month after Laura was killed, "we decided to hold a silent vigil with friends and members of our church," says Laura's mother Amanda Wilcox. A story about the planned vigil in the local paper drew other participants, and coverage of the vigil built interest in doing something about gun shows.

"When guns are sold at stores, there are laws to keep guns out of the wrong hands," says Wilcox. "But at gun shows, willing buyers and willing sellers are together without a lot of oversight." And at their vigil, the group was surprised that "gun shows are a family outing. Which is surprising, considering that 30,000 people per year are killed by firearms. Eight kids are killed per day. A child is more likely to catch a bullet than to catch the measles."

Asking questions

"We stopped the local gun shows basically by asking questions," says Wilcox. "Is illegal activity happening?" Vigil participants pushed the issue by

Building a network: An informal network started with people from the vigil, then expanded. They began coordinating through an email list, then joined the California Brady Chapters, a statewide network against gun violence.

Speaking up at meetings: The group attended meetings of the county's Fair Board and spoke against giving permission for future gun shows.

Alerting law enforcement: The Wilcoxes met with a deputy attorney general who then decided to investigate the next Nevada County gun show. They were introduced to the official by the staff of Senator Jack Scott, whose own son was killed in a gun accident.

Attracting press coverage: To publicize the vigil, the Wilcoxes contacted reporters they had met after their daughter's death. Another they met later when, as victims of violence, they spoke in public against the death penalty. Stories about the gun show issue appeared in the local paper and the Sacramento Bee.



Amanda and Nick Wilcox with photo of Laura, killed by gun fire at age 19

Pressing charges

The following November, investigators from the state Department of Justice identified several serious violations at a Nevada County gun show.

"It was up to us to get the DA to press charges, and to get the media coverage, which we did," says Wilcox. "Once we were successful at those two things, the gun show promoters saw that the gun shows were being increasingly monitored. They didn't want to do it anymore." The promoters decided not to hold any more gun shows in the county.

Continuing the work

The Nevada County group is continuing to work against gun violence, joining with the 17 other California Brady chapters to press for new state laws (see p. 16) and working with a group in Sacramento on local ordinances.

Gunshots are the second leading cause of death among children in the U.S, says Wilcox. "Where's the outrage?"

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