

Shots Fired

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NR - Nick Robertson

KT - Kristine Trocki

C - Chris Cannon

This is a story about how a debate over guns in a small Rhode Island got out of hand. But long before anyone was involved with the controversy, Nick Robertson was growing in rural Iowa in the 1940s and 50s. He learned how to be comfortable around a gun at a young age.

NR: My experience with guns started before I ever went to school. When I was a kid growing up in the midwest, a gun was a fairly common thing that was in almost every household in the rural communities where I lived. We hunted and we fished and we trapped. During hunting season, it was not uncommon to see a 12 or 13-year-old kid walking down the main street with a gun to go shooting hunting after school - rabbits, pheasants, whatever it might be. It was just a common practice.

After joining the navy at 17, and they ended up sending him to Jamestown, Rhode Island, where he's basically been living ever since. He now owns a 10-acre farm there, raising horses. He's enjoyed shooting on his farm, and he set up range behind the horse stables, where he could practice.

NR: The average person would say, well what's the point of just shooting a gun. They don't understand, because they've never done it, probably. You know, the skill of being able to hit dime-sized target at 100 yards, it's not everybody can do that. We started shooting here when I first bought this property back in '63. There'd be maybe a dozen of us would get together sometimes on a weekend, and we'd go out and we'd practice that particular skill - most of the time shooting under 50 yards. It was a good time, and they would bring some of their kids, some of their wives would come, their daughters. Probably not much different than the people who play golf and go to the club afterwards to discuss their scores.

Jamestown, where Nick lives, is about 40 minutes south of Providence, nestled between Kingston and Newport. It's a town of about 6,000 right on the Atlantic, 8 miles long and a mile wide, with lovely beaches and a beautiful view of the Newport bridge. Here's how the town council president, Kristine Trocki, describes it.

KT: We have one blinking stoplight and that's it, and it's only a red light - we don't even have a three-light light on the entire island. We have a rural nature to our island - a large percentage of our island is under conservation easements. And the people in Jamestown are very much focused on agriculture, and farming, and communities, and sustainability, and sailing, and boating, and protecting our parks, and protecting our town-owned golf course, and having the Conanicut Island land trust, and these walking trails and all of these lovely areas that we don't want to change.

Kristine first moved here about 20 years ago, because she thought the community would be a great place to raise her son. They could walk to town together from their house, go to baseball games, play on the beach. And a lot of people have moved to Jamestown over the years for similar reasons. But that means the Jamestown of today is a lot different from the Jamestown of 30, 40 years ago. The population has doubled since 1970 - from 3000 to 6000. And a lot of the people moving in are wealthier than the working-class population that originally lived on Jamestown. And this new, larger population has started causing some problems in town. Nick was not the only person who liked to shoot, and not everyone was super happy about that. Here's how Chris Cannon, who's been living on the island for the past 10 years or so, became aware of the issue.

CC: In my case, we built a house up on the north end of Jamestown on East Shore Road, and lived in it for 6 or 7 months, and heard shooting going on one day. So we didn't know what actually was going on, so I called the police, they came out, and they visited the house next door, and came over and said "there's target shooting there." And I said, well is that legal? And the police officer said "it's not illegal, there are no rules or regulations." Rhode Island has plenty of laws on hunting, plenty of laws on gun ownership, and all of that, but shooting on your private property is left up to the towns.

What Chris had discovered was one of the 7 private shooting ranges on the island, including Nick's backyard range. Many of the people like Nick had been shooting on their private land for decades, practicing for hunting season or just shooting for fun. But Chris wasn't happy with how close they were shooting to his home, and even scaring his dog.

CC: It was in December, it was dark, it was probably 6 pm, but I distinctly remember that night because the little poodle was quivering at about 10,000 revolutions per minute under a desk.

So Chris joined together with a local lawyer, and a group of other concerned Jamestown residents to try to convince the town to pass some regulations - assurances that people wouldn't be shooting at all hours, and so close to other people in town. They were concerned with the safety of the ranges - many of which were right next to conservation land on the north end of the island, where there are walking trails for residents.

CC: Let's say if they missed the pile of dirt, people walking around there had no knowledge or protection whatsoever. A stray bullet from a gun or a rifle could go 3 miles. They started looking into the NRA recommendations for what a safe range should look like. And it turns out there's a whole book on it - the Range Source Book - that includes hundreds of pages on how to build a safe range, what kind of backstops and side walls you should have, and how exactly to set up a target to minimize the risk of accidents. Many of the ranges in Jamestown didn't have these extensive protections, and while Nick said a lot of the range owners had their own safety procedures, there was no official guarantee that a range would have even meet the most basic standards.

CC: While 7 people did target shooting, they had basically had piles of dirt--there were no side barriers or top barriers or anything like that. And we looked up the NRA standards for shooting ranges, and they're very tight, very strong, and nothing here came close to that.

So Chris, his lawyer, and the rest of their cohort started sending letters to the town council and showing up to their meetings in August of 2014. They were asking for some regulations regarding target shooting. Kristine Trocki, the town council president, tried to forge a compromise.

KT: It was you know a good year and a half I would say that we spent time when this issue first surfaced, and we started having workshops regarding the issues to see if we could bring the hunters and the shooters together, along with our chief of police and the town administrator, to see if we could come up with some sort of solution that was viable.

But as the years went by, it was clear the issue became more politicized. Town debates were emotional, and neither side wanted to back down. And that's what led the town newspaper, in March of 2017, to put a poll on their website with four options - ban target shooting in the more populated areas of town, ban target shooting everywhere, keep the status quo, and no opinion. But that poll didn't exactly go as planned.

CC: First there were like 60 or 100 votes, ban target shooting. And I think on a one-week period, there were a thousand votes dumped into this thing to 'don't do anything, leave it as is'. And it had us crazy. So on a Sunday, we're all doing some research, and it turned out that some Jamestown, pretty astute, sent out something to the AR15.com group saying we gotta get on this thing, we gotta stop this, we gotta stop the libtards in Jamestown, from banning target shooting, and it may be too late. So suddenly this 1,000 votes rolled up there.

The post on AR15.com said "A little town in Rhode Island, full of an increasing number of liberal elitists from NY and NJ, needs your help." And then they linked to the poll. Dozens of people commented 'hit' to say they voted - from Florida, Washington, South Carolina, even people from England and the Czech Republic got involved. The survey ended up showing that 87% of Jamestown residents support keeping target shooting unregulated on the island, but who knows how many of those people were actually from there.

After years of deliberation and controversy the date of the final meeting was set - April 10th, 2017. That's when the town council decided to have an open hearing on whether they should ban target shooting.

The entire meeting was filmed, and is on the town website. The footage starts, people seem to be waiting anxiously for Kristine to begin the meeting.

KT: Good evening everyone. We're here tonight at the special town council meeting. Today is Monday April 10th, the 7 o'clock meeting of the town council with respect to the public hearing on the issue of target shooting. And we will start by standing up and doing the pledge of allegiance to be led by Blake.

****Pledge of Allegiance fadeout**

The five town council members are sitting in front of the crowd of over a hundred people. Meetings usually only have one or two dozen people, but this one has drawn a much larger audience. Every seat in the room is full, and people are even standing because there's no space left. Although Kristine tries to make the situation as civil as possible, things degenerate

before public comment even begins, not even ten minutes into the meeting, when Nick responds angrily to one of the councilors introducing a motion to completely ban target shooting.

CM: To move things along, I would like to make a motion to adopt the first ordinance, the total ban.

Crowd erupts - without hearing from any of us?

KT: Wait a minute, wait a minute

NR: A bunch of bull. You guys made up your mind, I don't buy any of it.

KT: If you can't be respectful...

NR: You don't want to hear from the public, you don't want to hear from your constituents that put you in that position, and yet you sit there and try to sell us this bill of goods you got out there. I ain't buying any of it.

After Kristine gets things in order, there are close to 4 hours of people talking about their feelings on the issue, going back and forth.

****collage of people**

But at the end of the day there needs to be a vote.

KT: We're left with the original motion of Gene's to prohibit the target shooting under section 38-11, 38-12, 38-13, 38-14, and 38-15. All in favor of the ban, the prohibition with amendments we just voted on, say aye. All opposed? Thank you everyone. It's been a long, long night. We appreciate you coming.

And so the ban passes, 3-2, with a couple of amendments to allow things like BB guns. As the meeting ends, people put on their coats and file out the door. But according to Kristine, it took a little while for things to go back to normal in the town. Some of those on the pro-target shooting side even threatened lawsuits.

KT: Was there backlash in the beginning? Yes. Did I get yelled at in McQuade's a couple times, the local grocery store, while I was shopping because somebody didn't like what I had to say and I didn't vote the way they wanted me to? Yes. But again, at the end of the conversation in McQuade's, I also said to the person look, this is what I think and this is how I feel and I did the best I could. And that person said well I don't agree with you but I respect the way you handled the meeting and I appreciate it.

Many of the pro-target shooting people in the meeting brought up the fact that shooting is part of the history and nature of Jamestown. And Kristine acknowledges and appreciates that, even if she can see that things are changing.

KT: We do have a very lovely rural character of our island. And we don't want our island to be gentrified like a Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard. The worst thing we can ever hear is Jamestown is the new Nantucket. So even though part of the island is now owned by very wealthy out-of-towners, we want to keep the rural character of the island to the extent that we can. And it's not a gentrified community with a McDonald's or Dunkin' Donuts on any part of the island. So I think that for us, the issue almost felt like if we voted against the target shooting, that somehow we were voting against wanting a rural community. And that wasn't the case - we all wanted to maintain a sense of rural

community, I think we all just realized too though that over the last few decades that it's no longer quite as rural as it once was.

The debate over target shooting finished last April, and it seems like the laws are here to stay. So now many of the target shooters like Nick go to the ranges nearby - there's one in 30 minutes away in Narragansett and another less than 20 minutes away in Newport. And hopefully they can find as much joy shooting there, as they did shooting at ranges they set up themselves behind their homes - because maybe shooting a gun in your backyard doesn't make sense anymore if your neighbor lives a couple hundred feet away, instead of several acres.