

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform
The Urgent Need to Address the Gun Violence Epidemic

Zeneta B. Everhart - Opening Statement

Zaire Mysaun Goodman, my son, was shot and injured by a domestic terrorist on Saturday, May 14th 2022 at the Tops grocery store where he was an employee in a historically Black Community on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo, NY.

Before I go into the day Zaire was shot and injured by a domestic terrorist let me start by telling you who Zaire Mysaun Goodman is.

Zaire, my son, or I as I like to call him The Kid, my sweet brown boy who is now a 21 year old man, is pure joy. He is everything that is good in this world. I realize this is what all mother's say about their children, but anyone who has met Zaire will also tell you the same things about him. He started walking at just nine months and by the age of two he could hold full conversations with you. I will also tell you that between the ages of two to eight Zaire gave me a run for my money. He was an old soul at a young age with an inquisitive mind and a free spirit; qualities that he still embodies today but with a little more direction and intention. His free thinking at the age of two gave him the bright idea to pull a chair up to my living room door, unlock it, and run away to the park with his two year old friend, both barefoot and only wearing pull-ups. He did all of this while his father was at work and my friends and I were moving some furniture into our new apartment through the back door. The day before this Zaire was with his father and I on a walk through the neighborhood and he saw the big dump trucks at a newly installed yet half finished park and was just ecstatic to see the real life versions of Bob the Builder right near his house. So the day he ran away I assume he thought he'd go over there to see if one of his favorite characters from TV was over there. When I realized Zaire was not in the house I frantically called the police and his father and the whole neighborhood were out looking for the two runaways. They were found on a huge dirt pile right near the dump trucks just playing and laughing. I tell you that story so that you understand that no matter the danger that was surrounding Zaire that day he was happy, he was laughing, he found joy in being covered in dirt. Fast forward to Saturday, May 14th, 2022 after I was finally allowed into the hospital room to see Zaire after he had been shot, Zaire saw me and said "I knew you'd be a mess Mom, but I knew I'd be fine." Even with a hole in his neck and back from a gunshot, Zaire was light on a dark day, Zaire was happy, and Zaire was full of joy, because as he said he knew he'd be fine.

At seven and eight years old Zaire began having difficulties in school. After many evaluations with doctors Zaire was diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome which is on the Autism Spectrum. It was then I realized that my inquisitive free spirited son's brain was functioning on a level that I knew nothing about. So I researched and I read all about Asperger's Syndrome. I wanted to make sure that I understood how best to cater to his way of thinking. Children with Asperger's syndrome tend to see the world differently than most of us. This diagnosis fully

revealed itself the day I was cleaning Zaire's bedroom and on the floor of his closet I found seven water bottles half filled with water, each bottle contained a different type of seed which Zaire labeled himself. There was a bottle that had apple seeds, watermelon seeds, orange seeds, and green beans. I know you're thinking exactly what I was thinking at the time; this is NOT how you grow fruits and vegetables, but to Zaire I guess he thought he was doing something great. At that age all he ate were fruits and vegetables, a far cry from the twenty-one year old he is now whose diet only consists of pizza. Over the years Zaire received extensive therapy and received services in school to help him to navigate through a quote unquote normal world. It was quite beautiful to see Zaire transform over the years. From fifth grade through High School Zaire attended City Honors School in Buffalo. There he was a part of the STAR program. A program designed to help students with learning differences. From Freshman year to his Senior year Zaire also was a student at the Buffalo Center for Arts & Technology also known as BCAT. This program ran after school and throughout the summer. Being a part of this program was a turning point for Zaire. He began to blossom. BCAT allows high school students in the City of Buffalo the opportunity to participate in programs such as videography, dance, photography, digital media, and art. Zaire found his tribe and his voice. At BCAT Zaire worked with other students to create documentaries about climate change, food insecurities, and politics. They conducted interviews with local elected officials and people from the community. They edited the video, did voice overs, worked on lighting, and presented these videos to the community. Zaire was growing up before my eyes into a young man who cared about the world. Zaire graduated high school with a regents diploma and then he was off to college. Zaire was accepted into Villa Maria College of Buffalo. Yes, my Alma Mater. Proud moment! He wanted to study Digital Film-Making. At Villa Maria Zaire was a part of the ACHIEVE Program, a program quite like the STAR Program at City Honors. The ACHIEVE Program helps college students with learning differences become successful throughout their college career. Zaire was just two semesters into college when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It was hard for him to adjust. One of the many issues that children with Asperger's Syndrome face is change. Change is hard for them. They need routine and they need consistency. So Zaire decided to take time off from school. Understandably!

The summer of 2020 Zaire decided that he wanted to work. Yes, I freaked out. Zaire said maybe I can go work at a grocery store and help people Mom since that's really the only thing open. I cringed as I listened to him wanting to put himself in danger as thousands of people were dying everyday from COVID-19. His heart is pure and so I gave in. I knew someone who worked at the store and I asked if they were hiring. Zaire was hired a week later and began his job at Tops grocery store on Jefferson Avenue in the city of Buffalo. Zaire loved his job and the people he worked with. He also loved that he could walk to work or ride his bike as we live just blocks from the grocery store. He loved the people he'd meet everyday. He became a fixture at Tops as I would regularly get text messages from people saying they saw Zaire at work while they were shopping. When I went to the store his co-workers would always say hi Zaire's Mom. This is our community, this is Zaire's community and Zaire is a part of that fabric.

Saturday, May 14th 2022 started like any other Saturday morning in my house. I was up cleaning and Zaire was making himself some breakfast before he headed off to work. In the

kitchen we talked and I asked Zaire if he needed anything from BJ's as that was where I was headed that day. Zaire requested snacks as usual and as he left for work I said have a great day Kid. At BJ's I was just about finished with my shopping and my phone rang, it was Zaire. I answered the phone like I usually did, "hey Kid what's up." Mom, Mom, Mom, get here now I got shot." Words that a mother never wants to hear. The screech in Zaire's voice hit me to my core. He was scared, I could feel his trembling body through the phone. I screamed, told Zaire I was coming. I left my cart and ran through the store, and outside to my car. As I drove, I asked Zaire where on his body he was shot and he said I think it's my back. At that moment my head was foggy all I could think was this is bad, this is very, very, bad. I cried and told Zaire to stay on the phone and to not hang up. I clicked over and called my mother who was at my house just blocks from the grocery store and told her to go there because Zaire got shot. I clicked back over and Zaire was still on the line. At this time an ambulance had arrived and EMTs were with him. I told him again that I'm coming Kid Mommy is on the way and to stay on the phone. I clicked back over and called his dad and told him to get to the grocery store where our son had been shot. I clicked back over to Zaire and he was in the ambulance headed to the hospital. I was told by the EMT to meet them at ECMC - Erie County Medical Center. My mother was calling me back. I told Zaire to hold on and to stay on the phone. I answered for my mother and she was screaming that she didn't see Zaire but there were bodies everywhere. She was hysterical! I said Mom Zaire is in the ambulance and he's on his way to the hospital to meet me there. I clicked back over to Zaire and as I was crying, driving, and shaking I asked the Universe to spare my child. I said it over and over and then Zaire's phone hung up. I called back several times as I pulled into the hospital parking lot, still no answer. I got to the hospital and pleaded with the nurses to let me see my son. At that time I was in full panic mode because they wouldn't let me see him. They escorted me to a quiet room where I sat on the floor pleading to the nurses and police officer to let me see Zaire and pleading to the Universe to spare my child. As I sat on that cold hospital floor for what felt like days I contemplated how I would end my own life if my son did not survive. Zaire was my life, how could I continue to live if he was not there. Zaire's father was brought into the quiet room and then we were allowed to go see Zaire. As we turned the corner I pleaded again to the Universe to spare my child. We walked into that hospital room and saw our son hooked up to machines and with multiple IVs. He looked at us with a look of relief, worry, and anguish. We hugged him as best we could through all of the cords and he said Mom, I knew you'd be a mess, but I knew I'd be fine. And we cried and we laughed.

Zaire you have a purpose, you are a walking miracle and you are now going to have to find out what that purpose is. Your ancestors literally had your back. These are the words I spoke to Zaire as we drove home from the hospital just four hours after a bullet tore through the lower right side of his neck and through his back. People don't just walk out of the hospital after an injury like that. You have to live now knowing that you are truly here for a reason. In the days following the shooting and as I clean his gun shot wounds, I can now see and feel pieces of shrapnel trying to exit his body. His doctor will now have to cut into him to remove them, however many of the pieces of shrapnel will remain with him for the rest of his life. He will have a constant reminder literally imbedded in his flesh of what a racist terrorist did to him on a beautiful sunny day while he was at work, doing what 20-year-olds should be doing.

Therapy will also now become a part of life. While his physical wounds will heal his mental wound will remain for the rest of his life. He will have to process what happened to him as well as the pain he feels for the ten lives that were lost that day and his fellow co-workers who were also injured.

As Director of Diversity and Inclusion with New York State Senator Tim Kennedy's office stories of gun violence and racism are all too familiar but now these stories are my story. They are Zaire's stories. These problems literally knocked on my front door. These are issues that as a country we do not like to openly discuss. When asked over and over again how we move forward from tragedies like this, I said then and I will say it here to you today. Education! Domestic terrorism exists in this country for three reasons. America is inherently violent, access to guns is as easy as buying a piece of bubble gum from the store, and we have an inadequate education system.

America is inherently violent. This is who we are as a Nation. The very existence of this country was founded on violence, hate, and racism, with the near annihilation of my Native brothers and sisters. My Ancestors, brought to America through the slave trade were the first currency of America, let me say that again for the people in the back, my Ancestors, the first currency of America were stripped of their heritage and culture, separated from their families, bargained for on auction blocks, sold, beaten, raped, and lynched, yet I continuously hear after every mass shooting that this is not who we are as Americans and as a Nation. Hear me clearly, this is exactly who and what America is.

Education. Majority of what I have learned about African American History I did not learn until I went to college, and I had to choose those classes. Why is that? Why is African American History not a part of American History? African Americans built this country from the ground up. My Ancestors' blood is embedded in the soil. We have to change the curriculum in schools across the country so that we may adequately educate our children. Reading about history is crucial to the future of this country. Learning about other cultures, ethnicities, and religions in school should not be something that is up for debate. We cannot continue to whitewash education creating generations of children to believe that one race of people are better than the other. Our differences should make us curious, not angry. At the end of the day, I bleed, you bleed, we are all human. That awful day that will now be a part of the history books, hopefully. Let us not forget to add that horrific day to the curriculum that we teach our children.

Guns. The eight-teen year old terrorist who stormed into my community armed with an AR-15 killing ten people and injuring three others received a shot gun from his parents for his sixteenth birthday. For Zaire's sixteenth birthday I bought him a few video games, some headphones, a pizza and a cake. We are not the same! How? Why? And what in the world is wrong with this country? Children should not be armed with weapons. Parents who provide their children with guns should be held accountable. Lawmakers who continuously allow these mass shootings to continue by not passing stricter gun laws should be voted out. To the lawmakers who feel that we do not need stricter gun laws let me paint a picture for you: My son Zaire has a hole in the

right side of his neck, two on his back and another on his leg caused by an exploding bullet from an AR-15. As I clean his wounds I can feel pieces of that bullet in his back. Shrapnel will be left inside of his body for the rest of his life. Now I want you to picture this exact scenario for one of your children. This should NOT be my life or yours. As an elected official it is your duty to draft legislation that protects Zaire and all of the children and citizens in this country. Common sense gun laws are not about your personal feelings or beliefs. You are elected because you have been chosen and are trusted to protect us but I say to you today, I do not feel protected. Your position should be about the needs of the greater good. As a citizen of this country I believe in the second amendment and the right to bear arms. However, no citizen walking the streets needs an AR-15. Let me say that again for the people in the back. No citizen needs an AR-15. These weapons are designed to do the most harm in the least amount of time. And on Saturday May 14th, 2022 it took a domestic terrorist just two minutes to shoot and kill ten people and injure three others. If after hearing from me and the other people testifying here today does not move you to act on gun laws, I invite you to my home to help me to clean Zaire's wounds so that you may see up close the damage that has been caused to my son and my community.

To the families of: Ruth Whitfield, Pearl Young, Katherine Massey, Heyward Patterson, Celestine Chaney, Geraldine Talley, Aaron Salter, Andre Mackneil, Margus Morrison, and Roberta Drury I promise that their deaths will not be in vain. Zaire and I promise to use our voice to lift their names and we will carry their spirit with us as we embark on this journey to create change. I know that their collective souls watched out for Zaire that day and I am eternally grateful to them.

To the East Side of Buffalo: I love you! I'm speaking directly to my people, to my hood. From Bailey, to Broadway, to Kensington, to Fillmore, to Delevan to Jefferson and every street in between just like the potholes that we want filled in (y'all know I keep it real), together we will continue to fill those streets with love no matter what people say about the East Side of Buffalo. We will not be broken. I was born there, raised there, I raised my son there, I still live there, and I do the majority of my professional work there. I vow to you today that everywhere I go I will make sure that people hear the real stories of our people. For too long our community has been neglected and starved of the resources that we so greatly need. I promise that I will not stop pushing for more resources to be funneled into the East Side of Buffalo. Each and every person that lives within that community we are family. Not a perfect community but I know that we are Love.

To the greater Buffalo area, to everyone from around the country and the world who have reached out and loved on us; On behalf of Zaire, Zaire's father Damien Goodman, my mother, my father, my sisters, my brothers, Zaire's other grandmother, his aunts, uncles, our entire family and myself we thank you for all of your thoughts and prayers. Thank you for all of the love and support you have shown to us during this difficult time. But I also say to you today with a heart full from the outpouring of love that you all so freely gave to us, your thoughts and prayers are not enough. We need you to stand with us in the days, weeks, months, and years to come and be ready to go to work and help us to create the change this country so desperately needs.

Zaire, this is for you Kid! Happy Birthday!

Namaste!