

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Gun Control

By Carol Murphy

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“One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter.” James Earl Jones

At 4, Chad Latham was a beautiful child with curly blond hair, huge brown eyes and a sturdy build. I first saw him standing on the edge of a fenced field wearing a red windbreaker, jeans and sneakers. A light breeze ruffled his jacket as he stood with his hands in his pockets, watching a group of boys kicking a soccer ball to each other in joyous raucous movements. His shoulders were hunched and his head was slightly bowed. I couldn't quite see his expression, but his body was rigidly fixed as if he was resolved to work out some dilemma.

The preschool director who had taken me out to observe him sighed. “Most of the time he just stands alone watching the kids. Other times he walks around in the middle of the playground or sits on a platform at the top of the jungle gym. It's really heartbreaking because you can see he wants to be part of the activity. He only has one or two words per utterance, and that's only in response to direct questions. Mostly his speech consists of “yeh” or “no” and he usually has no eye gaze. He only speaks when he is happy but he isn't happy much of the time because talking is so hard. His mother gets his hearing tested every year, so we know he can hear, even though sometimes he doesn't even turn when his name is called. I am so glad his parents called you.”

Over a few days I gave him several tests. He was attentive, cooperative and tried hard so I wrote in his report that although he might appear modestly slower than his peers, I felt sure he wasn't. A lot of children can seem intellectually challenged when their language is delayed. But, I really didn't know if I could help him, and honestly I was a little concerned about even starting since I thought he might be better off in a special school and I didn't want to waste any time. But, his parents insisted because the preschool was walking distance for his grandmother who took care of him and they were very concerned about him learning to talk and play with what they called “normal” children.

Speech-language therapy began with me just trying to become his friend during recess. So, when he climbed the jungle gym and sat on the platform, so did I. When he stood in the middle of the playground, so did I. When the teacher called for the kids to line up, so did I. All

said things like, “Up here!” or “Boy running”, or “I can line up”. I’m sure the preschool teachers wondered about my methods, but I persisted, and one day, Chad started holding my hand, and repeating what I said. That was the beginning. After that, his language took off like quickly. He finally got to the point where I could tell him what to say to the other children so he could learn how to talk and play with them. His parents were great and followed through on everything I suggested. Progress went on like this for a year. He even began to learn the alphabet!

Everyone was thrilled.

Then, one day when I was at another school, the director called me. “Carol, you have to come here now. Chad will not talk at all. Something is really wrong and we don’t know what to do for him. We can’t get a hold of either of his parents.”

So, of course, I went.

Chad was in the director’s office, under a table with his arms over his head. When I came in, the director said, “He’s been this way all morning.” Then she got up and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

“Well, Chad,” I said getting down on the floor and peering under the table, “Looks like you are not happy.”

No response.

“Hmmm, well, how about if I get under there with you?”

He still did not respond or move.

So, I squeezed under the table, thanking God I bought my clothes at Goodwill and was short. Then I said the first thing that popped into my mind. “I use to have a bridge I hid under.”

He unwound his arms, turned his head slightly and looked into my eyes. “Bridge?”

“Yes, and, it was right in front of my house. No one ever found me there.”

“Why bridge?” His head was up now.

“Because there was a creek in the front of my house. We had to have a bridge to get over it. On my street, there were lots of bridges. Sort of cool, huh?” Well, at least I got him talking.

“Why you go there?” He looked interested now. His sentences were getting longer even though his grammar problems had become more pronounced.

“I only went under there when I was really upset, because there were spiders.”

“Spiders!”

“Yes, lots of them. No one cleaned under that bridge. But, there aren’t any spiders under here.” The conversation did not need to shift to spiders.

“But, hey, I only went under there when I was mad or sad. So, you look like you might be hiding like I used to.”

No response. Oh, oh. Now he was back to not talking; time to try another maneuver. “So, Chad, should I call your dad and tell him you are stuck under a table?”

His head jerked like he’d been stung. “NO!”

“Well, we can’t stay here all day. For one thing, I’m getting stiff. And, you’re missing school.”

No response.

“Look, I can tell something is wrong. Might as well just tell me.”

No answer.

“Well, how about drawing whatever it is. Then, you won’t have to say it?”

“Okay”. At least he was starting to move in the right direction. As I was squeezing myself back out, the director walked in very quietly. When she saw me slipping out from under the table, she left again.

I got some paper and crayons and went back under the table. “Here’s a big piece of paper, Chad. Just draw whatever you are scared of.”

I waited while he used black to draw a hard to interpret figure, coloring it in furiously. When he stopped drawing and put the crayons away, I stared at it, turning it around several times to see if I could see what it was. Finally, he took it from me and laid it out in front of us. At that angle it looked something like a funny shaped pocket with a fat handle coming out of the top.

“This is a really great drawing,” I commented not allowing my confusion to show. “Wanna give it a name?”

“Gun.” He whispered the word so quietly I almost missed it.

My heart leaped to my throat, but I said, very calmly, “Really a gun? Where’s the skinny part where the bullet comes out? How come you drew that?”

No response. There were too many questions, too much language for him to process.

“Where does the bullet come out?”

He pointed to the part of the drawing that appeared stuck in the envelope-cover-like shape. Finally I could see it - a gun in a holster!

I knew his father was a hunter and that he had guns, but I had been told they were locked safely away in a gun safe. And this was not a rifle.

“Well, where is this gun, Chad?”

“Under bed.”

“Whose bed?”

“Mommy and daddy.”

“So, you were under their bed?”

“Yes.”

“Hiding?”

“No.”

“Playing?”

“No.”

“Then why did you go under there?”

“Car go there.” He stared into my eyes, a gaze so strong I was momentarily transfixed. “Me good boy.” His eyes were wide and a tear trickled down his cheek. Also I noticed his language had regressed. He hadn’t used “me” for “I” in a long time.

“Of course you are a good boy. You didn’t know there was a gun under there.” Now I had a bigger picture. He had gone under the bed to get a toy car and saw the gun. His father had probably told him never to go near a gun without him being there, and I could see a terrible fear in that one tear.

“Are you afraid of that gun, Chad?”

Another tear fell down his face.

“Me took it out.”

“Out? You mean you took it out of the holster.”

He nodded. He looked away then back at me very carefully and said, “Me pull trigger.”

All of my body felt like I had been stunned. For a few moments I literally couldn’t move. Then, realizing this was a pivotal turn in the conversation, I thought of all the things that I could say, all of the things grown-ups say to kids to keep them safe. Things like, *Now, don’t ever touch that gun again.* Or, *Oh, my God! You could have shot yourself!* I knew that any of those things would only stop all of the talking. Chad was already about as scared as he could be.

So I asked the next logical question. “Did the bullet come out?”

“No, gun click.

Thank heavens!. The gun wasn't loaded, maybe. Maybe it just didn't fire. And what about the safety latch? My mind was racing and Chad was staring at me. So, I said the thing that I thought he was feeling, “Boy, that must be scary.”

He started to sob. I just let him cry. Heck, I wanted to cry. Imagine crawling under your parents' bed and finding a gun in a holster and taking it out? Imagine actually playing with that gun? Trying to shoot the gun? I knew he understood he wasn't supposed to touch a gun. Most all kids do, but their curiosity gets the better of them. That's how they get hurt, even killed. So, we just stayed under that table for what seemed like forever, with Chad quietly crying while I thought about my next question and waited for the crying to stop.

“Your picture is great, Chad. I didn't know your dad used a small gun to go hunting.”
Sniff. “No.”

“Hmm. So, this is another gun he has?”

Sniff, sniff. “Yes”.

This put a whole new light on an already terrible situation. What the heck was a hand gun doing under a parent's bed? Why wasn't it locked up with the others? Then, my protective mother side emerged. What the heck was his dad thinking? This was child endangerment! What was going on in that house?

“Chad, I have a great idea. Why don't you eat your lunch under the table? I think they having chicken nuggets today.”

“Stay, Carol.”

“Sure, but I have to get our lunches. I'll be right back.” So I squeezed out from under the table again and went to the door. The director was right outside.

“I need two lunches,” I told her.

“What's going on? Is Chad okay?”

“It's tricky to talk about right now,” I whispered. “And no, he is not okay, but he is talking. Chad found a gun under his parent's bed.”

Her eyes got huge when I said that. “I'll be right back.”

In three minutes she was back with two lunches. “Thanks,” I said as I took them. “Try to find his parents.” I added and closed the door. I didn't even have time to hear her say, “Right away.”

“Well Chad, lunch looks yummy.” I took the plates and made my way under the table again. We ate in silence under the table, the picture of the gun laying on the floor in front of us. I wanted to start the conversation but I knew I had to be careful.

“Chad, you’re a pretty good artist.” I picked up his drawing and looked closely.

“Me hate guns.” Chad hit the picture with his fist.

“I do too.” My own voice sounded feeble.

About 40 minutes went by with us eating and Chad hitting the picture of the gun once more, tearing a hold in the middle of the paper.

I said nothing.

A faint knock came and the principal opened the door a crack. “I have to talk to you, Carol.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said to Chad. “Here you can have my cookie.” Again I climbed out from under the table and walked out the door.

“We located his mother and she’s about to blow her stack.” The principal was seriously anxious.

“What do you mean? We had to tell her. Someone has to go get that gun and put it in a safe place. In fact, I’m not sure we don’t have to notify Child Protective Services.”

“No, Carol, you don’t understand. She’s absolutely furious with her husband.”

“Oh, so she knew nothing about that gun being under her bed? Well, I guess I might be furious too.”

“She’s on the phone and wants to talk to you.”

“Okay, but someone has to stay with Chad.”

“I’ll stay with him. Use the phone in room 1.”

So I went into the room next door where a wild-eyed secretary was holding a receiver. She nervously handed it to me and quickly left.

“This is Carol.”

“Carol, I don’t understand what could have happened. This is terrible. I thought my husband locked away all the guns. That is what he told me.”

I was very angry. Chad was under a table barely talking and it was hard for me to understand why this mother wouldn’t know about this gun. I also knew I couldn’t show my anger because it would only escalate a terrible situation.

“Let’s try to find your husband.” Chad’s dad was a PG&E lineman. Apparently he wasn’t answering his cell phone so he was probably up working on wires, but cell phones were then in their infancy then, so maybe his was just out of range.

“I’ll call his office.” She sounded determined, then added. “How is Chad doing?”

“He’s eating lunch under a table in the director’s office and I can’t get him out yet.”

“Oh, no. Look, both my husband and I work over an hour away. Maybe we could have a conference call. I think Chad needs to hear mine and his father’s voice as soon as possible. And please don’t call his grandmother. I know she’s listed as the one to call in an emergency and she walks him to school, but I don’t want her involved. She never liked my husband.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t call her yet, but you two need to realize that this could be a matter for Child Protective Services. At best its child endangerment. My license mandates I report matters.”

“Please, please wait until we talk to my husband. There’s got to be some rational explanation. I can only guess that he just forgot about that gun.”

Finally I responded with what I thought. “It’s hard to forget a gun under a bed.”

“Maybe.....,” was all she could offer and hung up.

I knew I had 48 hours to make a report to CPS so I did have time to wait, but I didn’t have long. Chad’s mother called me back within 10 minutes and said she had located her husband and had set up a conference call with her, her husband, me and Chad.

“Chad can barely get out a sentence right now. I think the three of us should talk first.”

So, while the director sat with Chad under the table, the three of us had a heated conversation with Chad’s parents doing nearly all of the talking with each other and mostly just arguing. Apparently Chad’s dad had taped the gun in the holster under his side of the bed and not told his wife.

“What? You taped it under the bed? What were you thinking?” Obviously, the tape hadn’t held. Then Chad found it when he went under the bed to retrieve his toy car.

“Look,” Mr. Latham spoke sternly to his wife. “Remember that prowler the police said broke into the house next door? I just thought I might need it.”

“But what about our agreement?” Chad’s mother was confused and shocked.

Clearly they were not on the same page.

I was exasperated and I wanted them to make a plan of how to speak with Chad.

“I think you two will have to talk about this at home. Chad is right outside. He needs your support and reassurance. And I want to know by tomorrow how this has been resolved. I have to decide what I am going to do.”

This last statement created apprehension and anger in Chad’s dad who demanded to know what I was going to do.

I did not want to discuss that then because I really didn’t know. “You need to talk to Chad,” I repeated.

“Yes,” they both said.

So I got Chad and put him on the line, the speaker on so I could hear too.

To be fair, the conversation that ensued showed Chad’s parents willingness to talk at his level, expressing their distress at him finding the gun, and using comforting words. They continually told Chad how much they loved him and that he was a good boy. As I watched him, his body relaxed, his tears dried up, and his responses seemed more in keeping with all of the work on language we had done together.

The anxiety I felt began to dissipate. I learned all of the circumstances surrounding the gun. Chad had not been hurt but his parents did eventually separate. And I did report the incident to the proper social services department. Interestingly, Chad’s speech quickly returned to post therapy performance and it began to grow at hyper speed, especially later, after the divorce.

A recent study found that over half of the prison inmate population has learning problems. Since eighty percent of learning disabilities is speech-language based, I often think about this story and others like it when I remember that statistic. It is difficult to talk when secrets are kept and nebulous messages only create confusion, and even harder when you already have a speech problem. Communication grows best in nurturing environments where clear thoughts and feelings can be easily shared.

Speech problems can be almost invisible, but they can have deadly consequences. Chad is a young man now, going to college, hopefully creating many great relationships. I doubt he will ever forget the lessons in gun control.

Neither will I.

