Sydney Chen: Interview by Gabrielle Douglas

 10/5/2023

 Conducted over Zoom

Sydney Chen (She/Her) is a youth Gun Rights Activist from the DMV area, more specifically Northern Virgina. Chen began her work in 2018 under an organization named Students Demand Action, or SDA. In this Chen pursued a number of policy initiatives, even successfully passing the Red Flag Law, in an effort to counter the growing issue of gun violence within the United States. In this organization, Chen partnered with many different groups such as Moms Demand Action, the Black Lives Matter movement, and even Sikh organizations. Chen has also conducted policy work for the purpose of increasing voter registration. Chen has since left the movement (left in 2020) but continues to work to educate herself on topics related to global health, and voter registration.

GABRIELLE DOUGLAS

0:03

Hi, Sydney. Thank you so much for joining me today. I just want to remind you that this will be added to the Duke archive to truly highlight the underrepresented sector of Youth Activism. The goal of this is to simply share your story though. Remember that no details too big or too small, the story is completely in your hands. Now stop me if you have any questions, I want to make sure that you are completely comfortable at all times. And then any questions that I cannot answer my professor Ms.Wesley Hogan definitely can. So, do you have any questions?

SYDNEY CHEN

0:38

I don't think so.

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DOUGLAS

0:39

Okay, perfect. Let's get started. So, my very first question is, where did you grow up, and how did that affect your view of the world?

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CHEN

0:48

I grew up in Northern Virginia, sort of close to DC. And that definitely, in terms of political activities especially, it affected me a lot to grow up so close to DC and have all of the news constantly surrounding me and my family, and just a bunch of perspectives also was pretty prevalent in Nova especially because we have a really diverse demographic, I would say. There's a lot of different Asian cultures, representation from all over the world. So, I think I got used to being immersed in a lot of different perspectives, as well as different political perspectives pertaining to what was happening at the capitol that day, or, just the crazy tabloid that would come out, that just weren’t true.

DOUGLAS

1:39

And then could you tell us a little bit more about what kind of activism you do? Or did?

CHEN

1:44

So, I was part of an organization called Students Demand Action, or SDA[[1]](#footnote-1). I was one of the chapter leaders, so I would start a chapter of SDA at my high school, and we would we organize school wide events that would help to educate people about the work that we were doing. Once a year, we would go to the Capitol, and we would lobby for certain bills and legislation. And we got to meet with our local representatives, we got to have the time of day to talk to them, which is pretty awesome. And during COVID[[2]](#footnote-2), it was difficult to continue that work so, we moved into a virtual field office, which was the DMV field office. I was also spearheading that movement as well, in terms of coordinating across Maryland and DC and Virginia, how do we get people to come out and vote even during a pandemic? There’s kind of a mix of voter education/registration, and then also the policy advocacy part of it as well, focused on gun safety itself. I think, a core tenet of SDA and MDA, which is Moms Demand Action[[3]](#footnote-3), was that we were focusing on policy change. So, we weren't as active, like March for our Lives[[4]](#footnote-4), for example, in marches and stuff like that, or like outright protests. But we were able to go to the NRA[[5]](#footnote-5) and make a stand there. Because, again, it's in our backyard, I passed the NRA every day when I went to school as another part of it.

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DOUGLAS

3:28

Wow. Okay, and then what specifically pulled you into this form of activism as opposed to other forms?

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CHEN

3:34

I think it really started with the Parkland Shooting. I think, unfortunately, a lot of school shooting galvanized the movement in a way that it's really tragic, that such a tragic event is what makes you finally realized what the problem is. But I think that was probably the...Stoneman Douglas[[6]](#footnote-6)… I'm talking about the Douglas shooting on February 14. That was probably the biggest thing that made me care and just be scared out of my mind of like, this could happen that any of our schools. We heard that UNC[[7]](#footnote-7) had two school lockdowns for active shooters recently. And the other part was, in Virginia, I know they do lockdown drills differently in certain schools, but in my school, it was pretty routinely that we would do a shooter lockdown drill. And you know, I remember being in elementary school, like fifth grade, our teacher had to explain there might be a scary man on the playground with a gun. And that was just a foreign concept to me, but from a very young age, you were kind of prepping for that already. And then the shooting was what kind of made me decide that I was sick of being scared. I think it was a fear thing out of all of it.

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DOUGLAS

4:50

That’s so understandable, especially with the amount of shootings that have amassed in recent years. And going into that, let's talk a little bit more about the groups that you've worked to counter the shootings. Can you tell us specifically what groups you worked with? And what was the environment like within the movement?

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CHEN

5:09

It was it was MDA, Mom's Demand Action, and March for Our Lives. I don't actually know exactly how this happened, but we were talking to a lot of Sikh[[8]](#footnote-8) organizations, like the religious groups, because a lot of times they wore similar headwraps that gets them mistaken for following the Islamic faith and things like that. And therefore are the subjects of a lot of hate crimes, and a lot of, unfortunately, sometimes shootings. And then we also, a couple of times, at the Capitol itself... I don't know, there were just youth activists who were the pages of certain senators [[9]](#footnote-9) or others so, we would also work with them too. But I think that the main organizations were March for our Lives which was much more adjacent to SDA. And then MDA, which is like our mom's chapter.

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DOUGLAS

6:32

Got it! That's very extensive. Could you tell us more about what it looked like working within these organizations? Going to policymakers at such a young age, how was that kind of experience?

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CHEN

6:48

I think, especially as a younger person, we got probably a little bit of a nicer experience. Because we'd arrive at the Capitol, and for us, we went to our Virginia Capitol. We would schedule an appointment with a legislative aide, walk into the office, give our spiel that we've practiced because you're not as experienced in those kinds of things. We would practice a bunch beforehand. We go in, we say our piece, the legislators were very receptive to talking to us about how we felt about this, especially school shootings, obviously, it was a very touchy topic. And the way that we were kind of privy to a nicer experience was that we wanted to go talk to the Republican, typically more pro gun rights, senators, and they would hear us and they would kind of nod a little bit, and then they would send us away. So I think we were definitely sheltered from some of the things that they would have otherwise said, because it's not always pretty for the older groups that went in. But at a young age, it was definitely eye opening to see how complicated the policymaking process was, and how much of a machine it is. Truly a juggernaut of so many different parts and so many different things. It was a little bit overwhelming at times, just to think about, “are we actually going to make any difference right now? Because it feels like we're not even being taken seriously.” They're just kind of smiling and, you know, waving us away. So, we weren't innocent to the fact that we were kind of being pampered a little bit, in terms of some of the senator responses.

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DOUGLAS

8:25

That makes sense. And do you feel that there were any groups that particularly were more receptive to what y'all were trying to fix? Or do you think that it was more patronizing the entire way?

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CHEN

8:38

 I went to a convention for creating a gun safety constitution for young people across America. And we found a lot of support from Teacher's Union, Black Lives Matter. Oh, I forgot a bunch of people that we've worked with. Yes, Teacher Groups, Teachers Unions, Black Lives Matter, a lot of different queer youth activist organizations, I can't remember the name exactly. And they, of course, were all very receptive and very supportive. And especially the senators, or local representatives, who typically leaned a little bit more left, they were very, very receptive. And it definitely wasn't condescending in the way that they were kind of condescending of the movement, but they would definitely just see high schoolers walk in and think that was a little bit young, but they were very otherwise.

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DOUGLAS

9:35

That makes sense. And it's great to see a lot of these groups working together. But shifting gears just a little, fid you face any direct pushback from any groups? Or would you say that people were genuinely welcoming throughout?

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CHEN

9:49

Oh, we faced pushback from not many groups, but students at our high school. We would have our poster up at the club fair and people would come up to us and sort of question a lot of what we were doing. Which we never discouraged, we always wanted it to be an open conversation, because we also realized that we were just kids, and we had a lot to learn as well. So, for example, we had our poster up, and this kid came up and asked us about what it would mean to sell guns with a safety lock, because sometimes shootings happen because kids will just find a gun and fire without really knowing what it is. And so, a solution to that would be selling every gun with a safety box with a lock on it. And so, one of the kids was asking about the ethics of that, this is really technical, but some safety locks have a biometric locks scanner on it, where you can only get into it if you're the adult, for example. But then you're like, “Oh, well, you can easily take that out with a little bit of glue and a fingerprint.” So, we would get confrontation, or at least a lot of questions from a lot of our peers. But I can't remember an exclusive group that was very vocal against our group. Of course, the NRA wasn't particularly happy with us. But there's nothing much that I can say to that, we never really met them in person.

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DOUGLAS

10:59

That makes perfect sense. And what was your group's overall goal or initiative at the end of the day, in terms of policy?

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CHEN

11:07

We accomplished our main policy goal which was to get a Red Flag Law approved. And should I explain what that is? (Douglas nods and responds “Sure!”) Red Flag Laws are laws where if there's a person who has had violent behavior in the past, usually repeated violent behavior in the past, and a family member does not feel safe. And that violent member of the family has a firearm, a person of their family, or someone close to them is allowed to go to a judge and get basically that firearm removed from that violent person. And the way that mental health comes into it is that a lot of the time, right now firearms are being taken away from quote unquote mentally ill people. But the research that's coming out now is telling us that mental illness is not in fact, the indicator for violent behavior, or causing harm to oneself. The predictor of violent behaviors, like previous violent behavior. So it's sort of that distinction that the Red Flag tried to pinpoint. And specifically, self-harm is kind of what that law targets, especially. But it also comes into attacking other people. So that was our big policy that we wanted to get passed. And we did while I was there. And then, this kind of was another reason why I left was that it just felt that it's heartening to continue, it got repealed maybe two years later, or there's a big amendment change, where they basically shut down all the meaningful parts of the law. Because we had a Republican Majority in the House. So, it was a success we accomplished in our time, but once we all graduated and looked back none of it was standing.1

DOUGLAS

13:16

That makes sense, and that's really disheartening to hear. And before we shift gears into why you left and things of that nature, I want to ask how much intersection with mental health did you face while working within the gun rights movement?

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Speaker 2

13:33

A lot of intersection. So I attended a Johns Hopkins research seminar on this kind of thing. And we talked a lot in depth about mental health. And the stories you hear about mentally ill people who have a gun, and it ends up in the mass shooting, those are like a hyper sensationalized, I'm not sure if that's the word. Those are your more rare cases, and that is a really harmful to stigma that mentally ill people or people with depression or whatever, can't take care of themselves, things like that. So we talked a lot about how there is an intersection in terms of self-harm, and those violent thoughts coming out. And you're much more successful in executing on those thoughts with the firearm. We talked about on a personal level, that might be true, but then on a mass shooting level, it usually isn't the case. Not always, but usually isn't the case. And I wanted to make these distinctions so that it is all accurate, but it isn't the case that it always manifests on other people. So it doesn't always make sense to just take away firearms from every single mentally for people with mental illness or something like that. I can't think of anything else specifically, every single time any convention any workshop, we always brought up mental health so they’re definitely married in a sense, but you want to make sure that you know where they're connected and where they're definitely not.

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DOUGLAS

15:02

That makes perfect sense, and that distinction is very much important. I was wondering, how did y'all handle learning about such heavy topics at quite a young age?

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CHEN

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It's simple, stupid little things as even, like giving us playdough to play with, while you're learning about these things. And it sounds very childish, but it was pretty big stuff to be handling at that so early on. And that's actually another reason why I kind of had to take a step backwards, because it felt so large and heavy and difficult to process all the time. But I think also, it was a lot of going through as a group, and also realizing that there's hundreds, thousands of other students who are also fighting for the same thing. There were survivors that came in and talked to us. And it's inspiring to hear the stories. So as much as it is difficult to hear, it's always inspiring to hear about the work that other people are doing, and the stories that people have gone through. And you always remember why you're fighting for it. Even when it gets to the point where it's sometimes too much, you want to take a step back, it's definitely a collectivist sort of everyone's got to do it together. And ultimately, you're fighting for something that you hopefully will never have to go through. That's another big part of it, too.

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DOUGLAS

16:25

Oh, and I'm sorry, just processing. But what does success in this movement look like to you?

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CHEN

16:32

It's really difficult, because I think for me, it would be some sort of assuredness that really far in the future, like my kids, for example hopefully won't have to worry about that. I have family friends, and they'd have kids or whatever it it's like, you hope that they don't have to drop into a world like that. So, I think for me would be sort of that certainty. But then if that's the case, then I don't really think we're ever going to get there. Because you're never going to be entirely certain of anything in your life, and especially something that's so hotly debated in the US, it's almost impossible to have that 100% certainty. But in general, I think on a larger scale, I think you can only really affect it on a personal level, because it's such a different thing for everyone.

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DOUGLAS

17:23

That makes sense. And it sucks the fact that we won't really have that solid end to it. But thanks to people like you I definitely see it hopefully coming here soon. Let's shift gears just a little bit more. And I know you mentioned leaving the movement. Can we talk about what kind of factors led to that decision?

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CHEN

17:46

At first it was consuming my life in high school in a way that I had the energy and the gumption, that’s such a southern word, but to pursue it wholeheartedly and be super involved in that. And then sort of along the same time as when the law that we fought for fell, it was very much of all four years of work. You work for something you think, you have it, and you just don't. So, it was sort of a disheartening element, and it knocked the wind out of my sails. But I think that was definitely part of it. Plus, moving to college was a big transitional point where it was hard to keep up with what I'd already been doing. Also, because I was so established and working with the DMV area, it felt kind of strange to be starting over in North Carolina. And then also from my mental health, I think it felt like a lot to always be thinking about the next election or about registering voters or all these different things. And when you're sort of involved in this movement, you're searching up a lot of these horrible things, and the Internet will keep feeding these horrible things, because it thinks we're interested in that and just how the algorithm works or whatever. So, seeing shootings on your feed all the time and on the internet, and just popping up everywhere. It was sort of sad, and difficult for me to handle for a lot more time. So, gun violence has been classified as a health epidemic. And in a lot of ways, I've continued working. I'm a global health major, I work a lot in global health epidemic style of things. So, I think that I continue to do similar work, but I just haven't necessarily been as outwardly spoken about the it's on safety and gun violence prevention.

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DOUGLAS

19:51

That makes sense and I completely understand. The weight of this this is huge. So I appreciate the caution, especially for your own personal mental health, and it's completely understood. But another question I wanted to ask you is, now that you've stepped back from this movement, how has your perspective on gun rights evolved over time?

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CHEN

20:16

One thing I always liked about SDA was that they were always focused on common sense gun legislation. We were never advocating for all guns to be taken away from all people or for guns to be completely outlawed. In America, that's not something that would be common sense, necessarily. So, I think because I had that mindset of, we need to do what's pragmatic, we need to just do something that all of us will agree on. I think that everyone can agree that five-year-old shouldn't have access to a gun, things that seems like common sense. And so, I think it's not just some people, but generally, it seems like common sense. So, I think that because I had that mindset, I don't know, if my views have necessarily changed a lot, I still think that it makes sense to not take away guns from every single person on this planet, because people have a right to self-defense. And also, as I've experienced more of the world, and kind of new situations, like personal safety have come has come into question I can totally understand why people feel safer with a gun. It all makes sense to me. So, I don't know if my views have necessarily changed as much as I've been able to affirm or explore them in different ways and kind of come back to the same view and realize that I still stand by what I was supporting in high school for sure. I can't think of anything major. I know that, in terms of policies that are happening, it's certainly frustrating to see certain things go by but in general, my views pretty much stayed the same, if not just more nuanced.

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DOUGLAS

21:55

And how do you handle different ideologies and beliefs when you come across them in regards to The Gun Rights Movement?

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CHEN

22:06

I think definitely a big thing that we have to deal with, especially being a younger group where people are like “Do you even know you're talking about?” It was always to find common ground, it was always to understand usually in both situations, both people don't feel safe. Talking to someone who was a very pro-gun rights person, usually we're both coming from a place where we don't feel safe. For me, it's different than how they don't feel safe. But we usually agree that something needs to be changed in terms of how our country is working. And we're not going to agree on how necessarily, but we can agree that we're coming from similar places. And once you can kind of establish some sort of common ground, the animosity and the desire to win an argument diffuses a lot. It was not always successful, but that's definitely how we started out trying things.

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DOUGLAS

23:02

That's very mature approach that I'm not sure a lot of people can get into. In speaking of other people's approaches, do you feel that the movement’s approach to advocating for gun rights have always aligned with your own personal values? Even outside of your group? Would you say that you were able to digest what methods that other groups used.

CHEN

23:28

I'll preface this by saying that politically, I tend to be more moderate, in general. So, I think that I wouldn't always agree with some of the tactics that we're used. Because on both sides, a lot of fear mongering is used. And that obviously is what got me involved in the movement. But once I was a part of it, I kind of realized that freaking people out and making them terrified for their lives and everything like that can polarize people in in different ways. So, it's not always like the most surefire way to gain support in a certain way or another. It definitely works effectively for certain people, but it can also turn a lot of people away, apolitical, a lot of people who don't want to hear about it, it can definitely turn away if you just appeal to that fear side of it. So yeah, and that way, definitely wasn't a fan of the fear mongering being used on either side because I think both sides are guilty of it. And otherwise, though, I think especially because SDA was a little bit more on the moderate side of things, I tended to agree, or at least feel that my values are being respected in that movement. And in general, like some, some demonstrations, I felt were some edged on a little bit violent, which is kind of the opposite of what we I thought we weren't really working for. Other than that, I don't feel like anything was so egregious that I would leave the movement and never associate with it again.

DOUGLAS

25:08

And going on the track of kind of methods, what do you think the best method is to introduce such a heavy topic to younger kids and kids who may not quite grasp it yet?

CHEN

25:25

It's a very difficult topic. I think there's no other way of doing it other than explaining that the school shootings are something that happens in America. And that you should be careful or watchful for this kind of thing. I'm trying to think, though, I'm not sure if I'm going to have a great answer for you on that one. Because I haven't really thought about how to introduce it, because it's just always been part of something that we've known about. I think for teens, hearing the survivor stories, really pulls at your heartstrings in a way that makes approaching such a difficult topic compelling still, in a way that you're fighting for more than just a statistic or more than just a faceless bill, you're fighting for people who have been through this kind of thing. And you hope to never go through something similar. So, there's no real sunshine and rainbows way to get into the movement, except for those personal stories, or just going through it with someone else, seeing if someone like your parents want to learn about it or with your sibling.

DOUGLAS

26:46

Yes, I definitely agree on that. And I want to know, how do you envision yourself within movements such as this or any other movement that you're passionate about going forward?

CHEN

26:59

Oh, I think I eventually do want to find my way back into doing maybe some lesser commitment work with the movement. I think I mentioned that virtual field office and voter registration, definitely very big into making sure that people are exercising their political rights, or their political voice too. So, I think that, for me, I'm always a big proponent of voting in all the elections, because every single election matters, and voting in a way that I feel is educated and being educated. So, I think that's where I envision my current and future participation in the movement. Do you also mean in terms of other political movements, and things like that?

 DOUGLAS

 27:43

Whatever are you interested in!

CHEN

 27:47

I think being educated in general is really important. So I would just make sure that I read up on what's going on in the world. And that's actually been a big part of global health for me, making sure that I know what's going on in the world so that I'm not just blindly crashing through things. So education, and then applying that education in voting, is how I currently see my involvement.

 DOUGLAS

 28:11

 And what would you say, started to draw you to those two areas? And when did you notice yourself being pulled in?

CHEN

 28:17

Well, it was definitely part of growing up in Nova. You just hear a bunch of stuff that's just not true. And so being able to distinguish between what's true and what's not true, that's where the education part of it came in. And then voting also just came in because of my work in the virtual field office.

DOUGLAS

 28:34

What lessons have you personally learned from your experience in the gun rights movement, following stepping away?

CHEN

 28:42

 I think that it's not always about being right. Or it's not even about if there is a right or a wrong, it's about doing what you believe in. And then you will suddenly be able to respect what other people are doing too. I was very turned off by political polarization in general, because it just didn't feel productive to me to just be so at odds with each other that you can't even talk to each other. So that's something big that I've learned. I will always entertain conversations with people. I probably enjoy those conversations more because I always feel like I come away with something new. So keeping an open mind, and an open ear to anything, I think is really important to helping everyone come together. My biggest frustration with the political polarization, which means my biggest takeaway was always creating spaces where I can be educated and hopefully other people will feel the same way and be able to learn too

DOUGLAS

 29:47

Even in college now, do you happen to see like the gun rights movement come up? I know you mentioned UNC, how have you viewed the responses in the methods for change, in that regard?

 CHEN

30:02

At Duke, I don't particularly see a big gun safety movement. I think that usually college campuses, I would say, are generally active in those regards, which is maybe in a way that I can't see. And then in terms of the methods, maybe there's one policy lab that's working on distilling research into easy-to-understand language that policymakers can understand. I think that's a really nuanced and effective way to make sure that the right research and correctly interpreted research is reaching the people who can really make change with policy. But I don't know if I have too much to comment on in terms of the methods being used on campus.

 DOUGLAS

31:00

That's completely understandable. And looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently within the movement? Or do you kind of like the way everything played out?

CHEN

31:10

 I would have liked to try and involve myself a little bit more in freshman year of college with the movement just to see if I could have kept the momentum going. It was so hard, though I'm sure you understand. I was getting swept up in everything at Duke. It's so overwhelming. Ultimately, I'm happy with what I did in high school. But I do wish I kind of fought to continue it more in my life. Although it was it was a very burned-out sort of situation that I was dealing with in terms of also getting out of high school feeling like you just got into college. So, you want a break. I would say if I were to change something would have been that.

DOUGLAS

 31:49

 Do you ever see yourself reemerging into this movement? Or would you rather focus your efforts more on education and voting?

CHEN

31:56

 I think what I mentioned before about just making sure that I'm educated and then voting and maybe doing some low commitment work, I would definitely be happy to happy to step back into it and reemerging. But I don't know if I could ever put myself quite at the nexus of what was happening in my area in terms of core places like that. Also, because I've found other passions in the public health space, where I feel my study is also kind of helping me narrow in on. So, I don't know if I could I don't know... I don't want to say never, I don't know if it's in the cards for me at this moment to completely reemerge back into doing work for the gun safety movement.

 DOUGLAS

32:43

That's that makes sense. Especially with the weight that's associated with it. Well, let's go back just a little bit more, one more time. While doing this work how did you find yourself balancing everything: your schoolwork, your social life, extracurriculars? Any you mentioned how it kind of consumed your life, so how did you find ways to kind of navigate that?

 CHEN

33:06

 I don't think I did. I will admit, in high school, I didn't have much of a social life. Pretty much all my after school curriculars were my social time. So, I didn’t have the most healthy work life balance that I've ever had. I don't think that it would bother me at the moment. I don't I don't think it really bothered me at all. Because, again, I called my high school friends into it. So that was also fun. I also was just a part of a lot of things where I had to show up. So, like dance, for example, I had to show up to dance. So, in a way that pulled me away from the work and I was able to focus on that and have fun, and it's something that I love. And then schoolwork wise, that always came first to any of the activism work I was doing. So, it was never a question of like priorities in my mind. But I was always able to knock out schoolwork. I would definitely sacrifice way too many hours of sleep to get it all done. So, I think I made it all work because I let other things not work, which included my sleep schedule, and a very vivid social life.

DOUGLAS

 34:21

I completely understand that. How was your work received by your loved ones?

 CHEN

34:28

 Oh, my parents were pretty supportive of it. They definitely liked the idea that I was I found a passion for something, and I found something that I cared about. And I think my younger sister was involved more in the voting registration side of things. But then, she wasn't ever involved in it in high school, like involved in SDA as a club because it is still a club in my high school. But in general, I would say they were all supportive and thought it was a pretty cool thing that I was able to go to the Capitol and talk about something that I cared about.

DOUGLAS

 35:03

What inspired you to keep going during that time? Was it the stories? The work that you saw being done? What really kept you grounded and going?

 CHEN

35:13

I think it was a community as well. Like, you just get crazy stories from voter registration, you’re cold calling people on the phone, like, “Hey, have you voted yet?” And there's really funny stories from that. I think, also, that the community has got to be some of the kindest, most supportive people that you will ever meet, and strongest people too. I think that's another reason that I kind of fell out of it was because once you step out of such an enriched environment, and you're not around that anymore, it becomes very difficult to keep it going by yourself. So in high school, when I had that environment, and when I was doing the work, and working with the kindest people ever it was pretty easy to motivate myself to care and really want to make other people proud and help them.

DOUGLAS

36:16

 was there an activist you attempted to emulate at the beginning of your journey? Or were you kind of just going for it and seeing what happens?

CHEN

36:25

The latter, going for it and seeing what happens. There were a lot of big names in the gun safety movement, but you never hope to never emulate them exactly because of the things that they've been through. But they were certainly inspirational.

DOUGLAS

36:48

No, that makes sense. And then also, during the movement, did you enter with a specific goal you wanted to accomplish? Or were you just there to learn? How did that work?

CHEN

37:00

 I definitely did not enter with a goal. I think I entered as an emotional response to just the fear and the anger, and “how can this possibly be something that we're talking about in a debate?” I thought the answer was clear. So, I definitely don't think I had a goal other than “let's change something, let's do something different. And I don't know why it's not happening now. So, I'll see why it's not happening.” So no, specific goal though.

DOUGLAS

37:28

What would you say was your most memorable moment as an activist?

CHEN

 37:38

I think it was always the moment when we'd go on a bus to Richmond, the Capitol, after a long day of work, and then come back. And it was little moments where my peers would go, “that was really cool.” And that was such an important moment for me to hear because in my mind, I was just pulling a bunch of kids in who are my friends who may or may not have cared, and they just were there for the ride. But then realizing the way that I was able to inspire people to care was pretty powerful. I don't think I realized that. For a lot of people, I was the entry point into the movement. So those moments where it was like, “Whoa, I've actually have changed people's perspective on things,” was a big moment. Also, going back to the Sikh organizations, there was a moment where it was a holiday, but we went to a Sikh Foundation, or an organization, and they were serving food, and they were very welcoming of us. And we were the only people who weren't of the Sikh faith. So that was one of the most memorable days because they were so thankful for us for caring about this work. And at the end, they were giving speeches and the Moms Demand Action person went up there, and I realized that no student had gone up there and let young people know what they can do. I remember, asking to go up and speak, to educate people on what younger people could do. And afterwards they gave us a CD, like music, and they were just very thankful for the outreach basically. And that's something that I'll never forget, just how much giving a voice or showing that you care can travel really far.

DOUGLAS

39:28

That's something that's really big. And I was wondering who in this movement pulled you in? I know you mentioned you had a friend. And I think you also mentioned it was an emotional response. But was there anyone who served as a mentor during this journey?

2

CHEN

39:45

She’s not a famous person, but this woman named Kim Perks, Kim being the first name Perks being the last name. She was like my Moms Dmand Action assigned student chapter liaison. She was great. Whatever crazy-brained idea I had, she would take it and run. She was a “yes and” person for me. And that was really important, especially because I was just starting out as a freshman in high school. I had no experience in activism whatsoever, and just feeling supported to really come to

Have this movement be whatever you want it to be. However you want to go about this is how ever you can go about this, was a big push for me.

DOUGLAS

40:28

And that's really, really powerful. I think having a mentor is super important.

2

CHEN

40:32

Yeah, exactly.

1

DOUGLAS

40:35

But how do you think your journey would have been affected if you didn't have one? Do you think it would have been changed in a major way? Or what do you think that would have looked like?

2

CHEN

40:47

I don't know, it probably would have probably gotten off to a slower start. I think I might have ended up in the same place. But I probably would have gotten off to a slower start because I wouldn't have felt as sure or confident in how I was being in chapter.

1

DOUGLAS

41:04

What are your fears and worries regarding this movement?

2

CHEN

41:10

I'm definitely worried that because the extreme sides of political movements and then also in the gun safe movement can typically be more attractive for people joining...I just… so I hate the political polarization, because then you're never going to come together and actually get something done. That's probably a personal opinion as well, I know that not everybody does that. But my worry is that we're going to lose sight of an actual pragmatic, realistic approach to gun violence or the gun safety movement, because no action is worse than a little bit where maybe it's 50% of what we want. But it's 50% of that material. My worry is that we're going to get so polarized to the point we can't do anything.

1

DOUGLAS

42:03

I definitely agree. A polarization is something we're seeing, implemented in a lot of movements, and is setting us back a bit. But going on that note, and keeping with that, what do you think is not being talked about enough? Would you say it's polarization? Is there something more compelling that people need to address?

2

CHEN

42:22

In general or in relation to the movement?

1

DOUGLAS

42:26

Let's start off with in general, and then you can funnel into the movement.

2

CHEN

42:32

I think that we're actually talking about political polarization a lot. And it's just hard to actually get people to care about educating themselves on both sides of the issue. So I think there's a mismatch between saying, we're talking about so much, but what's actually being done? And then there was just little TikTok[[10]](#footnote-10)/Facebook[[11]](#footnote-11) trials too about misinformation and stuff like that. So, I would imagine that we're probably on the right path. But maybe I'm just not seeing the results as fast as I want to. So that might be something on my end, and I think maybe the global perspective on guns is something that was valuable to me for figuring out. Like in Japan, for example, you realize that they have like two, one, shooting a year, if that. Even that's an anomaly. And you realize that there's a certain level of the cultural aspect of Japan versus America that comes into play. And I think that sometimes it's the realization that we have to work with what we are

 being given. And you have to work in the background that you have. So, it doesn't really make sense to compare Japan to America, when there's just clearly such different cultures, or it's not really what I mean to say. But they also don't need to have a firearm to calm down and deescalate a situation. Desacalization is something that is done differently in a lot of different countries. And I think that's something that was helpful for me to learn about, and I can imagine it to be helpful for other people as well.

1

DOUGLAS

44:24

I know you said that we can't really compare, would you suggest us trying to emulate instead, or instead just purely focusing on what we have, and how to fix that.

2

CHEN

44:35

I was kind of making two contradictory points in that last statement. So while we I don't think we should compare ourselves like, “Oh, if Japan can have one shooting, then we should also be able to have one shooting," that's not what I meant. I think that we shouldn't be making a comparison, but we can certainly take inspiration from the way that certain countries are able to deescalate certain situations. I think it's a very complicated issue. So probably just understanding what works in our country and why it works. Even if it's like, if something works in country A, and we're trying to apply it to us. Why does it work in country A? And does that make sense to necessarily try in the US?

1

DOUGLAS

45:29

And then remaining on this note about change? What would you consider to be a requirement for change everywhere?

2

CHEN

45:37

Conversation, and… maybe not conversation. I think I'm coming from the political polarization side of things. Well, it'd be necessary for change. I think community support, finding that community. Not like your actual community of people who you're around, but joining communities where that can just happen. That's definitely more necessary. Because it's really hard to do any of this alone. Which is why the movement is a lot of people. So, I would say that's probably the most important thing, money community.

1

DOUGLAS

46:13

What age level or group of maturity...What do you think this community should start as? Should it be with young kids and kind of working their way up? Should it start as teenagers moving up, or even adults?

CHEN

46:27

I don't think that there is a really *should* age for this kind of thing? I think people enter it when they need to and leave it when they need to. So I don't think that there is a should necessarily. I think it's actually rather unfortunate that the US has kids, young kids, teenagers even, riled up about this, because that means that it's really affecting everybody. So, I'm not really sure if there is necessarily an age in my opinion, but I guess, young people have a lot of energy and a lot of time. So, I don't know, that's kind of sad, though, that people so young have to get involved. So kind of a non-answer to that.

1

DOUGLAS

47:05

No, that's perfect. And then my final question for you is, what advice do you have for someone who's hoping to enter the scope of activism and things within the gun rights laws and things of that nature?

2

CHEN

47:18

Find your community, find the people who will keep you going and find the motivation that you need. And then also check in with yourself and make sure that you're doing this for something that you care about, which is kind of a given, usually. But sometimes, you can just get really swept up in what everyone else does, and making sure everyone else is taken care of that you forget... check it on yourself. Which I think the movement generally, especially gun violence, is really good at emphasizing, taking time for yourself. So, I think that's what I would say.

1

Speaker 1

47:57

Thank you so much, Sydney. I loved learning from you today and hearing your perspective. And I'm sure anyone who's listening to this, is going to learn so much from it. So thank you.

2

Speaker 2

48:07

Thanks for asking me Gabby. It was kind of crazy to take a trip down memory lane like that.

DOUGLAS

48:12

Of course.

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1. [Students Demand Action](https://t.e2ma.net/click/pnay8g/92nexmh/x94eix) is a grassroots movement, created by and for teens and young adults, to channel the energy and passion of high school and college-aged students into the fight against gun violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Worldwide pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moms Demand Action is a grassroots movement of Americans fighting for public safety measures that can protect people from gun violence**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. March for Our Lives (MFOL) is a student-led organization which leads demonstrations in support of gun control legislation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The National Rifle Association of America (NRA) is a [gun rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_rights) advocacy group based in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On February 14, 2018, 19-year-old [Nikolas Cruz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolas_Cruz) opened fire on students and staff at [Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marjory_Stoneman_Douglas_High_School) in the [Miami suburban town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miami_metropolitan_area) of [Parkland, Florida](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkland%2C_Florida), United States, killing 17 people and injuring 17 others. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “UNC” refers to The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sikhs are an ethnoreligious group who adheres to Sikhism. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A **United States Senate page** (**Senate page** or simply **page**) is a high-school age teen serving the [United States Senate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate) in [Washington, D.C.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington%2C_D.C.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. TikTok is a popular social media app that allows users to create, watch, and share 15-second videos shot on mobile devices or webcams. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Facebook is a website which allows users, who sign-up for free profiles, to connect with friends, work colleagues or people they don’t know, online. It allows users to share pictures, music, videos, and articles, as well as their own thoughts and opinions with however many people they like. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)