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## Keeping Our Children Safe from Gun Violence

### Newspaper Association Lunch

May 5, 2000

Thank you very much...the march that is occurring on Sunday, Mothers Day, is called the Million Mom March. It is an effort that was truly grassroots. It is a commitment on the part of thousands of women, most of whom are about to be mothers and their concern about the issue of violence, something that you have covered in your papers and that has hit very close to home for many of you.

I come today to speak about this as a mother who, as all mothers I know, is the designated worrier in my family, someone who has worried not only about the safety and health of my own daughter but of her friends and of the countless children whom I will never know by name but who I also worry about and care deeply that they navigate safely to adulthood.

I'm also keen obviously as the First Lady and the work that the Administration has attempted to do to deal with youth violence has been very much a part of my concern as well, and I come as a candidate for the United States Senate who believes strongly that whether we are worried about a program at home or as they venture out into society, there isn't any more important task for our state or our country than keeping our children out of harm's way.

I think that the spate of cruelty has certainly focused our attention on what is become almost daily experience that has dulled our sensitivity. We know that eleven children die a day from gunshot wounds self-inflicted, accidentally-occurring or deliberately, and we know the headlines that are drawn from the events in Colorado and Georgia and Michigan or even recently in our national zoo in Washington, and time and time again people say with such anguish in their voices "How could this have happened-why would one child kill another? How do we keep our children safe?"

I know that many people have many explanations for why this happens in our country. There is, in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy like Littleton on the national news, a lot of

finger-pointing. The gun lobby points at the entertainment industry, and the industry points back at the gun lobby; parents point at schools, and schools point at parents, and on it goes. And we don't ever really come to closure on what we need to do as a society to protect our children.

I believe, and have written so, that it takes a village, because I think that this is a problem that has to be addressed from many different angles. First we have to be honest about the role that guns play in these crimes. Now there have always been disagreements and fights. I remember the schoolyard walls that would break out in a very large public high school. I remember the bullying on the playground. I remember going to see "West Side Story" as a high school student, and being carried away by what seemed so exotic at the time.

But we know that despite the history of children having disagreements, and having fights, and even occasionally engaging in violence in the past, our problem is now of a very different kind. Too many children have easy access to guns, and that leads to many of the tragedies we have experienced. Many will argue that we don't need sensible gun control, and that these measures undermine the rights of gun owners, and of course, we all know the slogan that guns don't kill, only people do. But people have done the same throughout the millennia in many respects.

Human nature invokes the best and worst aspects, and we did not have this state of youth violence that stalks our land until relatively recently. And I am one who believes that when you break down neighborhood disintegration, the loss of parental and adult authority, all have contributed to an atmosphere in which children feel more at a loss about what the rules should be, or are, and how to conduct themselves, and the failure to learn to control their impulses, all of that, I think, is a contributing factor.

But in the absence of the numbers of guns that children have access to, the death toll would not be as great. We know that policies do work - the Brady bill is a perfect example. Since it was enacted over the very strong opposition of the gun lobby, more than 550,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers have been denied handguns. And we can only speculate about the crimes that have been avoided because their handguns were not provided. But we know from the numbers that we are a safer nation, and a saner nation, because of that legislation.

I think we need more people, and I would hope that more of the media, would take this issue up and educate readers by covering these stories and getting to the facts, because we have to do more to stand up to those who refuse to believe the reality that guns do kill, and that common-sense gun measures can make a difference.

I believe we need a comprehensive plan to stop gun violence, and it is one of the reasons I am running for the Senate, and one of the things I would fight hardest for. The Moms who are marching in Washington this Sunday have it right. We need to license and register all handguns. We license drivers before they get behind the wheel, to make sure that they drive safely. We register cars to make sure that someone is responsible for every vehicle on the road. But we don't do the same for deadly weapons.

Licensing gun owners and registering their guns are two of the most important pieces of a real gun safety policy. It would help us control out-of-state guns, which at this state make up about 90 percent of the firearms used in crimes here.

It would help us track down illegal guns, and catch unscrupulous gun owners. It would help make sure the people who are allowed to have guns know how to use them safely and legally. In fact, the New York laws are in many ways a model for what I think would be a good policy for us nation-wide. And as I have traveled around the state, not having visited all 62 counties, I've been to some pretty rural areas where people value their guns, just as they do in many parts of our country where they are sharpshooters and hunters, and where they don't have any particular problems we get up in New York with crime and guns.

I would also in the Senate champion new initiatives to create a ballistics database for all new guns. Each gun leaves a unique fingerprint on its bullet. What we would have in the national database are these images that law enforcement officers could use to quickly track down the origins of guns found at their crime scenes, and the criminals who use them. I applaud Governor Pataki here in this state, who shows real leadership in proposing a state-wide ballistics program, and I think it is something that needs to be done on the national level. Gun safety measures should be a bi-partisan effort.

Now as I said earlier, I believe that guns play a major role in the violence and the deadly effects of violence. But we have to pay more attention to what troubles our children before they ever pick up a weapon or start a fight. It's no secret to any of us that there's a lot of confusion and alienation out there. Now some of it is normal development as many parents here can attest. But some of this angst, and an increasing amount of it, is more serious.

We just held last week a conference at the White House on how to raise responsible teen-agers. And, there weren't any great surprises about what needed to be done, but it bore repeating that our children, in survey after survey, say that what they want more of is their parents' time. Many of us as parents are worried about peer pressure, we worry about the media culture's influence, and then our children tell us that they'll look to us for guidance, and values, and discipline, although they say it's not their favorite topic, but they're not getting enough time, not only from their parents, but from other responsible adults in their lives. And we also know that we're finally admitting there is an increasing amount of depression, and anxiety, and mental illness among our children that we are not picking up on, nor are we treating.

As I have gone around here in the state, I have met with many groups of people, and I've met with a large number of young people in high schools and in colleges, and we've had some Town Hall discussions. And I think it's fair to say that in every single one of them, one youngster or another will raise his or her hand, and say that the biggest worry on his mind was his friend is upset, who had nowhere to go for help. Sometimes the child is talking about himself, and I later learn when I talk to that young person afterward, but often it's about friends.

So, clearly, while I am talking mostly today about a comprehensive gun safety policy, we need as adults and as parents, to do more to reach out to our own children, and to create more support for all of our children, including the mental health services that are available, the counseling and mentoring opportunities that are there, the treatment that a child may need who is getting into trouble with alcohol or drugs. And we also have to recognize that, ever since 1972, in the Surgeon General's report that was issued that year, we know that consistent exposure to violence on television, in the movies, in video games and the media, have an effect on the way our children view violence, and whether or not their

capacity for empathy is dulled.

There is increasing concern about media violence has meant to our children, and every time I'm working with young people in one of these settings, one will invariably say, usually a young man but not always, "I play those video games, and I watch those movies, and I'm not going to try to kill somebody." And I always say, well that is good news and I am glad to hear it, but you have no way of knowing what the impact of that same exposure would be, to a child who has come from a background and maybe neglected or abused, or whose family has gone through a very tough time, or who for whatever genetic or biological reasons, has a temperament that is more of a hairtrigger with less control over impulsivity, whatever the combination of factors might be, we know that we have children who are pushed over the edge.

In the last five years, we have seen additional problems raised by the internet, as we try to mediate between our children and the information, and solicitation that they find online. All of us in this room, and certainly all of you in your profession, are committed to the genius of our Constitution, and our First Amendment. We know that we can't solve the challenges of exposure with anything like censorship, and wouldn't even consider it. So, we're going to have to put our heads together, and come up with some ideas about how we continue to protect the exceptions for adults, while we take more control over what children see or hear.

We have to ask the larger questions that have nothing to do with government regulation, and everything to do with why we as a culture glorify violence and find it increasingly acceptable. Why we laugh at it. Why we turn our backs to it. Why we leave our children alone in a bedroom watching heaven knows what, hanging out with their friends at malls, going to movies they shouldn't see, surfing the internet and being exposed to things that if a person came into our living room, and said or did, we would call the police.

One thing I think the media can do, is to create a system of uniform ratings, that let our parents navigate the often confusing systems we now have. You know, CD's have one rating, the movies another, television a third and the internet a fourth. It's very difficult even for conscientious parents to know how to do what they can do to exercise more authority over what their children are exposed to. And certainly this has not

been a problem for the media.

In every area, parents need, to once again assume more responsibility over the lives of their children. Because of the pressures of the way we live today, with longer work hours, greater worries about balancing home and work, the breakup of families, the disappearance of fathers, we have many young people who have told us in surveys, and in personal testimony, that they feel that they are living through their teenage years without enough adult supervision.

How will we encourage our families to do what most families and parents know needs to be done? Well, clearly I believe we have to do a better job in our own lives, defending our priorities, and putting our children first, and being clear about the responsibilities that come with parenthood, and being willing to invest the time that it requires. But I also think that our society can help with some of those decisions.

Legislation about family and medical leave can be extended so that parents can go to parent-teacher conferences without jeopardizing their jobs. Teachers and interest groups try to provide more quality affordable child care so that parents know that children are safe and taken well care of while they are working their long hours. They need more places in all of our communities where children can safely go after school and during summers, and evenings and weekends to play and learn.

It takes a lot of courage and faith to overcome the hopelessness and helplessness that many of us feel every time another incidence of violence strikes our children. And it does take resisting the impulse to throw up our hands, or clench our fists, and point our fingers at each other. That's why I think this march on Sunday is so important and has such potential.

In the face of too much inaction and division, ordinary citizens, women who just finally had enough, are organizing and marching, for the changes they think will make their jobs as mothers easier to do, but coming together on Sunday, know that there isn't any one way to quickly fix our culture of violence. There isn't any better way to send that message than this Sunday. I know that as a parent, there is no more harder job or greater challenge. And we cannot worry just about our own children, because the fates of other children

intersect with our own.

When those families gathered at the National Zoo, it was at an annual occurrence where so many African-American families come together to go to the Zoo, and spend time with their children. They had no way of knowing that a young man with a troubled past, who hadn't been given help and intervention, would pick up a gun that would kill and wound their own.

All of us therefore have a stake in making our entire society safe for our own children, and every child. And I will be one mom who will be proud to march with all of the others on Sunday, and I will join with those other mothers in the hope that we can represent the millions more who couldn't be in Washington or at one of the other marches, but who care deeply about protecting our children, and know that it is the most important job for any parent, in any nation, at any time. Thank you all very much.