

And two smoking barrels

Experiences with guns make more difference than actual gun laws



Guns and I have a long, storied history. We aren't friends per se, but we're not enemies. Mostly, our encounters have been a series of disappointments for each side.

I have shot a gun three times in my life. It didn't work out.

The moment came in Grand Island, a world of infinite possibilities, where we had neighbors that my ma best described as "neighborhood snoops."

"They spend all day over there just lookin' at us out their window," she said, "just peekin' through the curtain."

Of course, my parents do the same thing in our Omaha house now. In fact, they did back then, too — especially when the retired Green Beret across the street would sit on his front porch with his son under a pink blanket. (Another story, another time.)

Anyway, these snoops, whose names I don't remember (I'm not sure I ever knew), took my dad and me out to the shooting range one day.

My dad is a hunter. Apparently he's a good shot, but all the times I went hunting with him, he never hit anything.

The same applies to my oldest brother, who is also apparently a good shot. He prefers to stake out barren hunting lands in northern Nebraska and slog through thick weeds for three hours before giving up and settling down to the main attraction of the trip: breakfast at a truck stop.

At the range, I took three tries at shooting a gun, aiming with a rifle at a target far, far away.

First shot ...

"Nope," said Old Man Snoop.

Second shot ...

"Huh-uh," Snoop said again.

And my dad had to step in.

"What are you doing here? Lemme show you," he said.

My dad is one of those people who cannot watch anyone do anything for very long, even if he or she is doing it correctly. He perches like a hawk over me when I'm mowing the lawn, lest I screw up his fairway-quality grass.

It goes the same for just about everything else, except maybe egg frying, where his "Louisiana-style" technique of scrambled eggs (this is where the eggs cackle and burn in old bacon grease) goes over well with no one.

So he shows me the right way. But I still screw it up completely.

"Do you even know how to hold the goddamn thing?" my dad asked.

Call me crazy, but I enjoyed playing football, not sneaking my father's gun out of the locker and practicing for the big turkey shoot. How the hell would I know how to hold it?

So I've never shot again.

My first telemarketing job required me to sell memberships to the National Rifle Association.

Trust me: Not that many people were keen on buying a membership. It cost \$25 at the time, and for that you didn't get a whole lot unless you got shot or your gun got stolen. Outside of that, your only prize was a magazine full of guns.

The first couple of days did not go well for anyone in our training group.

"Don't woorry," our 18-year-old supervisor told us. "This is the hardest thing to sell in the company."

So it makes complete sense that the least-skilled people were selling it.

I don't take to pointless failure well, so after awhile, I decided I would sell NRA memberships as if my life depended on it.

Those 20 or so people who signed up under my watch must have thought they were getting a deal of a lifetime.

First of all, I lowered the price by 10 bucks. Then I made my own tailored list of phony benefits: a thousand acres of free hunting land, free hotels, free moving expenses, free food, a truckload of coupons and a whole set of Charlton Heston pictures, including the classic "Soylent Green."

But one poor soul must have believed he received the call of a lifetime.

"I'd love to sign up, but I'm going through a divorce right now, buddy," the old man said. "My ex is takin' a chunk outta me."

No worries, I told him. The NRA will provide you with a lawyer, free of charge, I said. I scored again.

Eventually, the gig was up, and I got caught.

"Your presentation was really, really gooooooood, your rebuttal tooooo," my supervisor told me with smoke breath. "But youuuu can't make stuff up in this business."

There are kids in high school who try and play hard. For this, I will never forget A.J.

A.J. was a kid in my health class, who sorta fashioned himself a hunk. A tough guy, to boot, plus a Casanova. Once, in junior high, he bought some girl a flashy gold necklace, which she proceeded to toss down the hall in a fervent rage screaming, "I don't want this shit! Leave me alone!"

Silly girl, throwin' away the jewels like that.

On this high school day, A.J. was wearing a No Fear T-shirt, which was pretty popular in those days. And another kid in the class, Nick, decided to sneer at this shirt.

Nick was a talented sneer artist. I think it has something to do with having a really small head.

"So you really have 'No Fear,' huh?" Nick said in full sneer effect, his little face all scrunched up in a sneer expression.

"Yeah." A.J. had a large head and therefore could not provide a sneer in response.

"Even if a gun was pointed at your head right now," Nick said, making a gun with his hands.

"I have had a gun pointed right at my head," A.J. said.

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious."

"When?"

"Last week."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes you are, asshole."

"No, it really did happen."

"So what'd you do to get a gun pointed at you?"

"Some people were messing with my friends."

"And you all have guns, huh?"

"Yep."

"Sure."

"I do."

"What kind of gun is it?"

Silence.

I went to a gun show not too far back for a story. I had never been to a gun show. I will never go again.

I have nothing against guns. I wish they didn't exist, but

it's a foolish wish, I know, and pointless, too, because our society would never agree to something like that.

We are a nation founded by, for and of guns. The Old West was defined by them. Our movies are inundated with them. And sometimes, it amazes me that Republicans battle away at violence in the movies when movies only mirror today's society. If there were no guns, there would be no movie gun violence.

But the situation cannot be true in the reverse.

Believing that, the gun show did surprise me. I didn't find the lunatics I expected to, which was just my own prejudice at work to begin with. There were a lot of husbands and wives buying together — another thing that surprised me.

And there were children, plenty of them, too. One boy, directly outside the gun show, fingered his father's leg holster, which carried a black handgun

whose caliber was unknown to me.

The boy looked up. "Can I see it?" he asked. His father unholstered the gun and gave it to him.

The boy wasn't much older than I was when I missed those three shots and disappointed my father. My dad tried not to show it, but he couldn't hide it well enough for his son not to see.

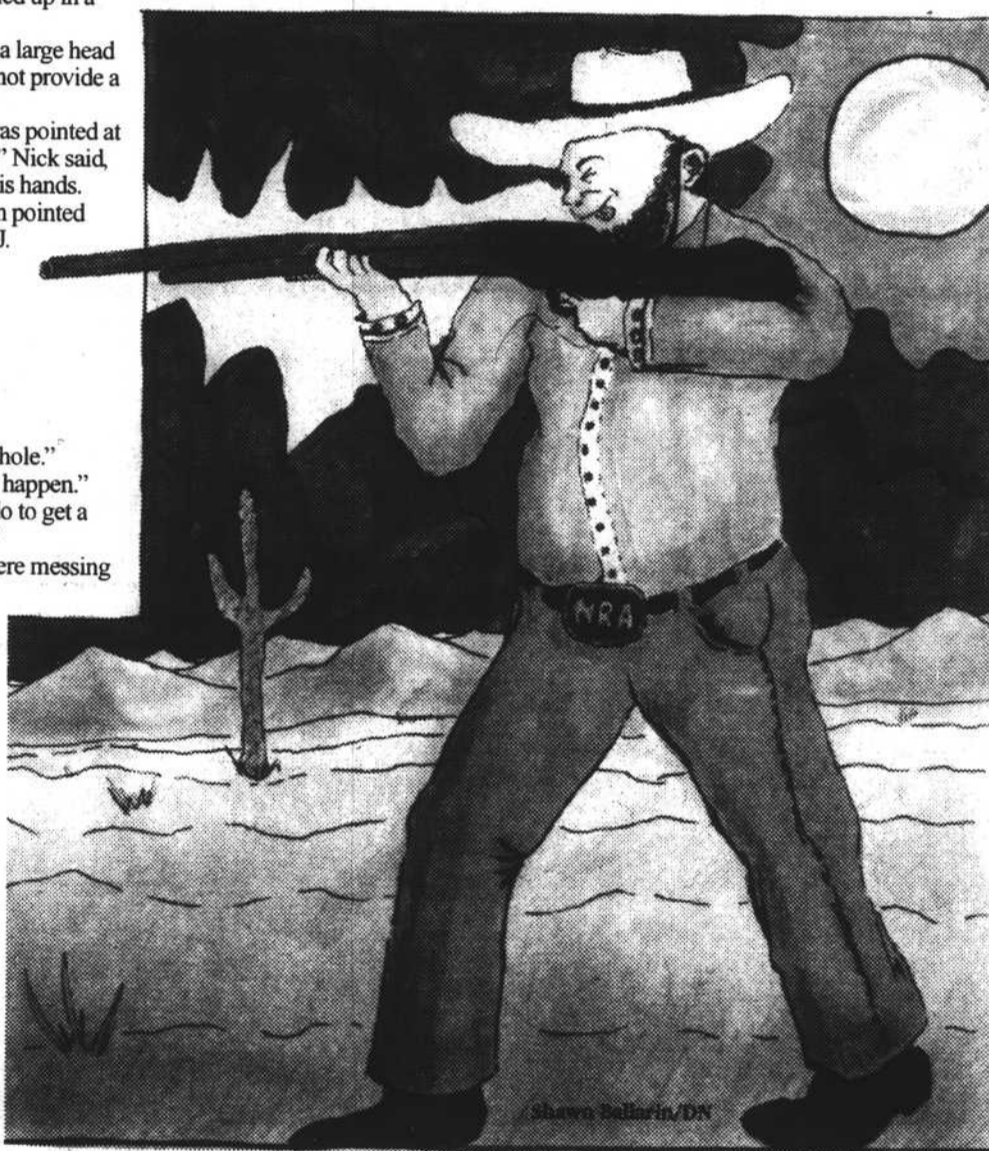
And if I had been a good shot on that day, maybe I'd be in the NRA, and maybe I'd have bragged like A.J. to someone else, too. Lord knows, I've lied about things in my life.

But sons don't often do what their fathers can't be proud of.

And guns didn't want me.

So, in turn, I never wanted them.

And there's more truth in that for me than any gun law that ever existed.



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It's not just true love

'The Vagina Monologues' give new meaning to Valentine's Day



There are times when we get lucky, and we stumble across an idea, an idea that seems obvious and long overdue, an idea sparking other ideas, lighting a fire for new thought. Eve Ensler had an idea about vaginas.

So she talked to women about their vaginas.

"I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas and even more worried that we don't think about them. So I decided to talk to women about their vaginas, to do vagina interviews, which became vagina monologues," wrote Eve Ensler,

author and activist, in the book version of her play.

The critically acclaimed play "The Vagina Monologues" transpired out of these talks. It's a series of individual monologues, all dealing with the vagina.

"The Vagina Monologues" uses the female organ as a front to voice a concern. It says what many women have been afraid to say, forcing the public to hear what it doesn't want to hear. The monologues are nothing if not taboo.

"It sounds like an infection, at best maybe a medical instrument, 'Hurry up bring me the vagina.' It never sounds like a word you want to say. Say you use it during sex trying to be politically correct. 'Darling, would you stroke my vagina?' No, you've killed it right there," one woman's story reads in "The Vagina Monologues."

By forcing the word vagina to the forefront, the play uses its lack of tact

to bring up any and every issue that deals with female sexuality. As the title list shows, the monologues cover genital mutilation, self-discovery and even vagina smell. Titles include:

"Vagina fact: genital mutilation."

"What does your vagina smell like?"

"I asked a six-year-old girl."

"The women who loved to make vaginas happy."

All that comes together to create a show described by New York Times reviewer Anita Gates as "alternately hilarious and deeply disturbing." Beyond forcing the public to deal with the word "vagina," the show has become a hallmark for women's activists. Since its first run in 1997, it has sparked V-Day and the college initiative, which is a national movement that started in 1998.

V-Day, which initially stood for Valentine's Day is celebrated by the college initiative, a nationwide, pro-

women collegiate movements that celebrates in February. It promotes women's awareness of women's sexuality and consequently has a reading of "The Vagina Monologues."

In 1999, 65 colleges participated in this. Sadly, the University of Nebraska was not one of those.

This year, Nebraska has joined with more than 120 other campuses, which include Creighton, Kansas State, Harvard, Yale and Colorado State.

The Women's Studies Association is presenting the play at the Seventh Street Loft this Sunday at 2 p.m. and Monday at 7:30 p.m.

"The Vagina Monologue's" cast will include faculty, students and also members of various businesses and political organizations.

Keri Wayne, who is in charge of the Nebraska branch of the college initiative, called the work "a masterpiece." She said the piece "is about society

coming to accept women's sexuality and the woman's vagina as part of the language."

She also said, "Surprisingly, the show has been pretty well supported."

However, the show has done little advertising so far. At Colorado State and Brown universities, banners supporting the show have been torn down, because many detractors of this show think it is too vulgar.

But calling the show vulgar is arguing with real life because all of the dialogue comes from real women.

Eve Ensler had an idea to spread the word about women's sexuality, and consequently, about women's vaginas. While her message is brutally harsh, it is also endearingly funny and unquestionably true.

If your looking for a new way to express love this Valentine's Day, then give love to all women, and maybe yourself as well. Go see "The Vagina Monologues."

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