

with rifles and other weapons during his service, and he obtained a concealed weapons permit to occasionally carry a gun when he owned an Auburn mobile home park and sometimes carried a large amount of cash after collecting rents.

So Wilson, a trim, gray-haired and goateed former real estate consultant, is honestly surprised anyone might be uneasy with or object to the fact that he keeps a loaded .357 Magnum in the nightstand of

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his airy Bellevue townhouse (“An unloaded weapon is nothing more than a club,” he says, smiling) or that he maintains a small collection of firearms, storing the guns in a closet at his house (though he has a gun safe on order). The way he looks at it, he’s devoted to firearm safety, is a pretty fair shot and is guaranteed the right to own his weapons under the Second Amendment. He votes in line with his convictions: An ardent NRA member, he regularly supports their picks for

political office. “I believe we should have lots of freedom,” he says. “That’s why we’re fortunate enough to live in this country.”

He’s happy to show his collection to visitors, plucking his firearms from closet shelves and from their carrying cases. He still goes to a firing range now and then to keep up his skills. He keeps his concealed weapons permit current but doesn’t often carry when he goes out.

Wilson, who is open with family and friends about his firearms, keeps his weapons around for a couple of reasons. First, he plain enjoys them. Like many a bike gearhead waxing on about frame geometry or gear ratios, he can instantly tell you all the fine details of his collection—velocity, range, modifications. And then there’s his conviction that, someday during his lifetime, he will be forced to use his weapons for protection, possibly against terrorists. But mostly, he says, he keeps so many weapons around for a simple reason: “I just like firearms.”

While Wilson, given his background, seems a prototypical gun owner, the profile of other gun owners in liberal-leaning Seattle is more surprising. Among them is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, champion marksman, NRA-certified firearms instructor—and self-described “queer,” who has volunteered for more than 15 years to teach members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community how to shoot. He works through Cease Fear, the Seattle chapter of the national group Pink Pistols, which has chapters in the United States and Canada. Their motto: “Pick on Someone Your Own Caliber.”

The Pink Pistols, which claims about 50 members in the Seattle area, describes itself as dedicated to the legal, safe and responsible use of firearms for self-defense by the sexual-minority community: “We no longer believe it is the right of those who hate and fear gay, lesbian, bi, trans or polyamorous persons to use us as targets for

target practice

A one-time gun opponent hits the firing range—and finds a new sport

BY MONICA FISCHER

PERSPIRATION PUDDLED IN THE SMALL OF MY BACK,

and my hands shook like a barfly without a cocktail. It wasn’t a first date, but it was an introduction of sorts: to handguns—and the physical and emotional responses they trigger.

I rolled my shoulders forward, stretched my arms in front of my body, and grasped the .22-caliber revolver in the two-handed grip I had learned just an hour earlier. I closed my left eye and looked down the barrel of the gun with my right, lined up the front sight with the target and slowly squeezed the trigger.



The blast was louder than I had expected—but also more exhilarating.

Like most people who have had no exposure to guns, I came to the InSights Training Center basic handgun safety class afraid of handguns. I was here because my boyfriend, a Texan who learned to shoot before he entered the first grade, had recently bought a handgun, and I believed it was my responsibility to learn how to use it safely.

The class, offered once a month by the Bellevue-based company, was held on a rainy September Saturday in the chilly basement range of the Issaquah police station. It alternated between lecture sessions—covering topics such as the universal firearm handling rules, the parts of a handgun and Washington’s deadly force laws—and time on the shooting range.

“You either like it or you don’t,” says InSights co-owner and instructor Stephanie Kerns, who coached my group on the range. “It’s never something you are going to feel completely comfortable with. It’s just not innate.”

Kerns, a fit, enthusiastic middle-aged woman with reddish brown hair and a broad smile, grew up in a gunless household. A little more than a decade ago, she attended her first handgun class in Seattle, to support a friend who had begun teaching. “I remember driving home on the last day of class feeling very

she signed up for a one-day class on firearms at a local shooting range. She liked it and appreciated the focus on safety. She took another class and realized she really liked the people she met at the range, which can be a very social place. "People who own guns, they're normal." Furthermore, she really, really liked shooting practice, finding it something that required the use of her total mind to do well.

"It's really fun, it's almost like yoga, the focus and concentration on breathing," Oshiro says. She's becoming a better shot these days, she says, and practices monthly. "I know technique and get a good shot when I concentrate."

About a year after she started shooting, Oshiro bought herself a Glock handgun. She also got a concealed weapons permit, but she muses whether she purchased the right gun for herself: "It's big to carry [concealed], especially in the summertime."

Fellow gun owner Charlie Sulcer calls himself a strictly middle-of-the-road kind of guy. Nowadays he's a Shoreline resident, but he grew up in Texas where his dad taught him how to shoot when he was in early elementary school. "My dad owned guns for years. He took me out back and taught me how to shoot his old rifle," he recalls in the soft drawl of his home state. "I've been doing it since. I've always enjoyed shooting."

He's 27 now, and, like the rest of his family, he's far from a gun nut, he says. It's simply that growing up in Texas, "guns are a part of life down there." He owns a shotgun and a handgun and gets out target shooting maybe once a month, usually at a gun range such as Wade's in Bellevue. Sometimes he goes out with a friend to his friend's property way out in the hills where they "plink" at targets, he says. "I'm a pretty damn good shot."

Sulcer and Wilson both believe keeping law-abiding people from owning weapons will do nothing to keep the violent or the crazy from obtaining them. "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," Wilson says firmly, repeating the predictable mantra of many firearm owners.

Sulcer agrees. "A gun is just a machine. It's all how you use it."

"The worst thing I can think of [is] if guns were taken away," Wilson adds. "The bad guys can always get guns."

And following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina last year, which left homeowners in Louisiana protecting their homes and property against intruders, it seems that, like Wilson and other gun owners, increasing numbers of Americans are feeling bullish on firearms, according to Alan Gottlieb, founder of the Second Amendment Foundation in Bellevue, a firearms rights group with national influence. People watched CNN as home and business owners tried to protect property against looters, and that has galvanized the public, he claims. The U.S. Senate's overwhelming passage of a measure in July to prohibit gun confiscations from private citizens in emergencies is proof of that, he says. (Washington senators Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray both voted in favor of the measure, which passed 84-16.)

"Senators who are very anti-gun before weren't really antigun after," says Gottlieb. "Public opinion won't let them. Even John Kerry voted our way. It was kind of surprising. All that momentum is moving in our favor an awful lot. I've been doing this over 30 years, and I haven't seen this much movement in our direction...as I've seen in the last few years since New Orleans."

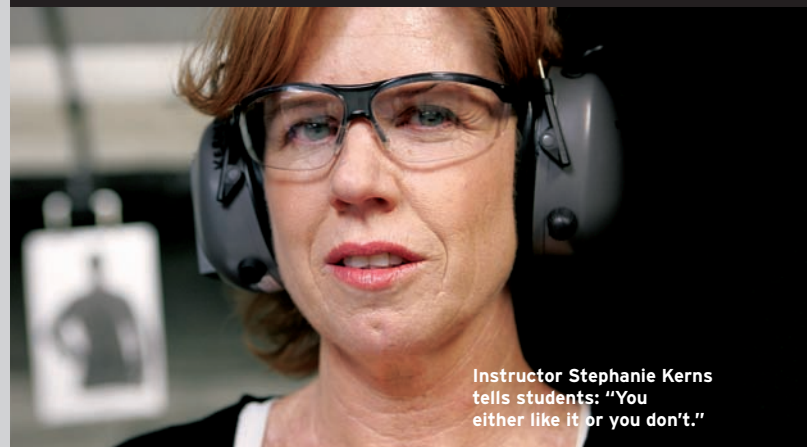
(target practice continued)

excited that I had challenged myself to do something that I had some fear about," she says. "It gave me a very good sense of empowerment."

It is a transformation she sees in the women she now teaches. "My experience has been that once they are exposed in a safe and responsible environment, they feel very differently about firearms."

Self-proclaimed Seattle liberal Carrie Oshiro, a 34-year-old former InSights student, is a prime example. "Growing up, my family was very anti-gun, so I was raised to believe that guns are scary and bad," she said in an interview a few days after my class. But about three and a half years ago, after watching

"IT'S NEVER SOMETHING YOU ARE GOING TO FEEL COMPLETELY COMFORTABLE WITH. IT'S JUST NOT INNATE."



Instructor Stephanie Kerns tells students: "You either like it or you don't."

Bowling for Columbine and realizing how prevalent guns are in American society, she decided to learn the basics of gun handling and safety. She began taking self-defense classes (including unarmed self-defense) and found that she enjoyed shooting. Today she owns a handgun—and a concealed pistol license—which can present something of a conundrum romantically. "When is it appropriate to tell a date that I carry a gun?" she muses. "If I mention it on the first date, guys tend to think I'm somewhat crazy."

For most women, there is no such awkward moment, because it is a man who has introduced them to guns in the first place. "If you want to spend time with a guy who likes guns, chances are that, sooner or later, he'll ask if you want to go to the range with him," says 38-year-old Kathy Jackson of Onalaska, a freelance writer, firearms instructor and mother of five.

And sure enough, there I was at the behest of a man—and so were my two female classmates. Lenise Brauer, a soft-spoken retired nurse who plans events for her Tri-Cities church, attended with her husband, an emergency room physician. Renton barber Nancy Look signed up "because my boyfriend is a gun nut."

Oshiro comments, "That's not surprising, because despite the fact that women are buying and (continued on page 301)

Target Practice

(Continued from page 157)

shooting guns in record numbers, males still dominate the gun world."

But while men may be leading women to guns, they can't, so to speak, make them drink. A 1996 study by the gun control organization Violence Policy Center, *Guns in America: Results of a Comprehensive National Survey on Firearms Ownership and Use*, found that only 6.6 percent of adult American women owned a handgun.

I found, though, that I loved shooting. It requires perfect form, attention to detail and singular concentration. Jackson describes the attraction perfectly: "When you shoot, you can think of nothing else but shooting. You can't think about the stuff that's bugging you, about the rotten kids or the annoying traffic or your crummy boss. ...Shooting is pure concentration on a difficult physical skill, while being calmly conscious of your breathing and of what your body is doing."

By the end of the day, my hands had stopped shaking, but my ears were ringing from the cacophony of progressively more powerful handguns: a .38-caliber revolver, 9-millimeter and 45-caliber semi-automatic pistols, and finally, a .357 magnum revolver—which I shot only once because the deafening boom scared the living daylights out of me.

With a gun like that—and indeed any gun—you cannot deny the breathtaking destruction of which it is capable. Whether through violence, accident or self-defense, a gun can end a human life, so handling a gun is an awesome responsibility. It's no wonder that so many people loathe their very existence.

But instead of being afraid of guns, I now respect them. And because I understand how they work, if I choose to shoot one in an appropriate and legal environment, I can do so safely.

While I no longer fear guns, I am still afraid of anyone who would use one to hurt me. And I can't say for sure whether I could pull the trigger if put in a situation where I was called on to defend my life. That is a decision that requires far more self-examination than is required from a one-day class on gun safety.

I returned home from class exhausted but abuzz with new knowledge and pride that I had conquered a fear and learned a new skill. As I regaled my boyfriend with stories of my day, an I-told-you-so grin spread across his face, and he asked, "So, are you still afraid of pistols?"

It took me a few moments to decide.

"Not at all," I finally replied. "Unless they're pointed at me." **S**



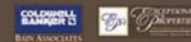
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