

Eyewitness Account of Highland Park Massacre

What Happens Next – 07.09.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics and current events.

Today's session revolves around two eyewitness accounts of the Highland Park Illinois July 4th Parade Massacre.

I was born and raised in Glencoe which is a couple of miles from the killing zone. My friends and family were at the Highland Park parade. Today, we will hear from my brother-in-law David Baum who is married to my wife's sister Debra. And then we will hear from David's daughter Brittany Wroblewski who is my niece.

Brittany marched in the parade with her son Blake moments before the shooting began.

We are going to start the conversation with my brother-in-law David Baum who is an obstetrician in Highland Park.

David, you were at the parade, what happened?

David Baum:

We were at the event to watch my grandson walk in the Children's Parade, which happened. The Children's Parade happened at 9:15, which is a yearly event in Highland Park. The kids go on scooters and tricycles, bikes. Some parents are pushing in strollers. I would think that there were hundreds of families walking with their kids, as my daughter and my son-in-law and my grandson walked. My grandson pushed his little bubble lawnmower. My concern was for people. Every time I saw a truck go by on a side street, I always thought of what happened last year in Wisconsin, which is just because I'm a paranoid grandfather.

The Children's Parade finishes, then the police and firetruck and search and rescue teams from the community. Then the Highland Park Marching Band comes through. Then there was a little lull before some of the other couple floats and a little klezmer band was to come through. Then the shots rang out. It was a series of incredible sounds that I've never heard before, never having actually been in close proximity to gunfire, but these were like sonic booms. These were just rapid fire, rapid fire, as you've heard. You've seen the audio. There was a couple 15-seconds delay while he probably put another clip in and then another 40 shots rang out. There was probably within 30 seconds, people were screaming, "Bodies down, bodies down, bodies down," and people started just running every different direction. That's it.

Larry Bernstein:

What did you do? What were your reactions?

David Baum:

I was as shocked as everybody else, but when I saw that my family had run, I just sort of stayed for about 45 seconds or a minute. Then when you see all these people screaming next to their relatives who were on the ground, I just sort of went. When I thought the shooting had stopped, the shooting had stopped. Then I went towards maybe 50 yards away, 50 yards to the west from where my family was seated was where all these bodies were strewn, mostly on the south side of the street, which would have been 50 feet away from the little perch up on top of the Uncle Dan's store that people have heard about.

But the bodies were tragically just strewn about in front of the Walker Brothers restaurant. That's where all the real carnage was. That's where there were six people who were blown up. There was a little boy, that we've all heard about, who the family has now finally disclosed that he is paralyzed. His spinal cord was severed. I saw the parents of the little boy who came to the parade with parents and left without parents. Those bodies were, the father was literally blown up. I was there with the paramedic when they were running around just trying to assess who was alive and who was dead. They were blown up. The father was literally blown apart.

I know down in Uvalde they said that they had to do DNA to identify some of those students. Well, now I know why because I saw firsthand what those bullets did to people. I saw the back of, I think, the gentleman, maybe that's too much, who was there from Mexico. I saw what it did to his head.

Larry Bernstein:

A lot of people were shot and didn't die. How severe were the wounds in those cases?

David Baum:

I mean, how many people are still in the hospital? Somebody who I know and I think you know, had the back of her foot blown up and will require a lot of surgery, but maybe it was a little shrapnel wound. I don't know. I don't know what his aim was like, but he just sprayed bullets.

Larry Bernstein:

Was he shooting from across the street for the Walker Bros.? Is that where his site was?

David Baum:

I think now I think I've heard he was up on top of the Gearhead or Uncle Dan's store and shooting down across the street because the people that were below him I think had the less serious. Those were not the casualties. Those are not the mortal casualties. It was across the street where the six bodies that were blown apart.

Larry Bernstein:

I spoke with Brittany. She was angry with you for not running away. Why did you run towards the wounded?

David Baum:

Well, Larry, your dad was an incredible doctor for years. I don't know if you would have asked him at 64 what he would have done, maybe he would've done the same thing. It's just sort of an instinctual thing that, as a physician, you're trying to try and help. But did I think in the moment that there was no chance that he was going to open up fire again, I don't think I thought that. I think I just heard people screaming, "Help, help, help, help, help." I went there. I don't think that's as important as everything else. Your dad may have done the same thing because he's a cardiologist and he maybe thought he could do CPR. I don't know. But in the moment, that's just what happened.

If Brittany said she was mad at me, she's not mad at me anymore. She understands. I mean, at the moment, she was overwhelmed with fear and she wanted everyone to be in the same place and getting out of there. Your nephew, my son, then came back to try and, he said he wanted to help. I was like, "Leave, just leave." I mean, did I feel the person had left? You hadn't heard gunfire in probably, at that point, a couple minutes. Then there were police running all around. Nobody knew what had happened, where he was or if he had left the scene.

Larry Bernstein:

What lessons have you learned from this experience?

David Baum:

Nothing about trying to help, zero about trying to help. There were other people who stayed there. There was somebody I know who was a plastic surgeon. He got his parents out of there. Then he came back a couple minutes later. There was a nurse. There was a nurse practitioner. There was an ER doctor. I think those people are like me. You just sort of instinctually feel like you should do something to help.

What I've learned is that the weapon that a 21-year-old had access to, there's only one purpose. It's not for shooting beer cans in the backyard. It's not for killing deer. It's not for hunting. It is for creating mass casualty. There is no good reason that gun can ever ... if somebody can tell me there that it could be used in warfare and use it in the war, but don't use it to rain terror down on people that went to a parade. The little two year old who went to a parade and left to be raised by his grandparents, I mean, it's just, I-

Larry Bernstein:

It's gross.

David Baum:

It's horrific, but every mass casualty is horrific. But when things didn't change after Sandy Hook, you knew there was a problem. But, this one happened in front of my eyes. You thought, "Sandy Hook, oh, my God." I mean, children in school, you see Uvalde. They resonate with you. But this one resonates obviously differently because if your sister-in-law would have put our chairs down in a different place, we may not have a family.

It could have been my grandson and every other young family pushing strollers and tricycles. It could have been the Highland Park Marching Band. But, it was a mass-casualty scene during a lull in the parade of the corner opposite where he was sitting on top of a Gearhead store. I mean, just the whole thing every day becomes more unimaginable to me that it actually happened.

Larry Bernstein:

How has the city come together afterwards?

David Baum:

I mean, yesterday I think there was a gathering in the park for people. I mean, I didn't go. I think people were just there. I don't know if it was a vigil. I think people or families are still, they're in shock. They're trying to calm their kids down. I mean, all the camps are trying to get started again and have counseling at the camps because the kids are afraid to leave their homes and go to camp or get on a bus. Every time a kid hears a siren now they run inside, which I guess it's going to take a while. But they were all there and their parents picked them up and ran for their lives because they thought that ... nobody knew where he was coming from. Nobody knew where he was shooting from. Nobody knew if there were other people. Nobody knew if there was explosives. I mean, it's hard to believe it happened in a community.

You're part of this community.

It's still hard to fathom that this is the new normal. This is the new normal. You can't fix what happens in certain families. I mean, obviously they've been talking about the family that he came from. I saw between 2010 and 2014, the police were called to the family for domestic issues between the husband and the wife, I don't know, it said 10 times in four years. There was concerns about substance abuse with one of the parents or alcohol abuse or something. It obviously was a family with a lot of issues.

You can't fix that family. You can't fix how he was brought up. I don't know if he was bullied. I don't think anyone knows what happens to that kid. But when he dropped out of high school, that was not a good thing. The fact that there was the suicide attempt and the threats against his own family were obviously red flags, which the Highland Park Police had records of the fact that the father co-signed for his FOID card at some point. Now he says he has no responsibility. You can't change that, but the easy access to a weapon that rained terror down four days ago and the damage it did in 45 seconds, it's why is that weapon still being sold? Why is it so available?

I mean, you're not going to be able to get them off the street, but can't they just stop putting them on the street? Why is it so available? It doesn't make any sense. That's the thing that really is disturbing that it's just there's no movement to get rid of them, or at least stop making them so available. There's lots of responsible gun owners. I get it. Guns are a part of people's lives. They have collections of them. If they are responsible and keep them locked up, okay, I can live with that. But that weapon that became so easily available to a kid that had 21 years of

probably not such a great upbringing, probably not such great DNA, maybe did not fit in in the community he was being raised in. I don't know, but you can't fix those things overnight.

Mental illness that starts at a young age or a lack of confidence or being bullied or lack of self-esteem, there's no pill for that. There's no TeleMed for that. It's beyond that. It's one gun that people like to strap across their chest like they walked around up in East Lansing a couple years ago when there was the COVID closures they were protesting. You saw those guys outside the Capitol in East Lansing with those guns strapped across their chest. Well, okay. At least they didn't open fire. It made them feel like they had control, but if any of those people had kids who had an impulsivity and a desire to kill and who were angry at something or feel like there were people that they wanted to punish, for whatever reason, you can't fix that. Those are generational problems.

I mean, it's not a kind society. I mean, this society has gotten worse in the past X-number of years. It's become okay to call people names during political events. It's become okay to storm the Capitol. I mean, it's insanity, but there is a weapon that I have seen firsthand what it just did to lives, to families, to a little boy, to an eight year old who's paralyzed. Who's paralyzed for being in front of a pancake shop. He's paralyzed because of the irresponsibility of a family, the mental illness of a 21 year old, the darkness that he got into maybe during COVID. I don't know, but those are not easily fixable. But an 80-round barrage of high-powered bullets from a, it's like if somebody wants to go up in a hunting perch, or whatever they do looking for a deer sitting there all day, that's fine.

You want to kill the deer and you got a license, kill the deer. Kill it with a bow and arrow. Kill it with an assault rifle, but don't, don't paralyze an eight year old for watching a parade. Don't make it so easy to kill our kids, ruin their lives, ruin the families. I mean, a two year old doesn't have parents for no reason. I just have a hard time. In the court of common sense, my right to safety and freedom and somebody's right to have that weapon, it doesn't equate. I mean, why are we not safe?

Larry Bernstein:

We get depressed at the end of these calls. Can you find any optimism?

David Baum:

Larry, I don't know. You've got a lot of listeners who are influential people who have resources, who have connections, who have the intelligence, who have the skills to organize, not like these little ... I mean, my daughter was talking about how there's just not well-organized anti-gun groups. There are all these little, tiny offshoots of groups that have no national presence. It takes people who understand how to build an organization, how to have legal, how to have financing, how to have everything that it takes to make real change. I don't know. I'm not sure that the country wants it. If it didn't happen after Sandy Hook, if it did not happen after Sandy Hook, I don't know.

I think Highland Park is almost off the news. It's going to probably go away. I hope it doesn't, but you've got a lot of people who probably feel the same way, but if this happens in Westport or Greenwich, or wherever it is, oh, it came to our community. Well, it came to my community. It's a nice community. We didn't do anything wrong and neither did anyone else, but that weapon has no right in the hands of an 18, 19, 20, 21 year old. It doesn't have any right in the hands of a 25 year old, but it's got to start somewhere. It has to start with something changing because you cannot fix mental illness overnight.

You cannot fix families that are irresponsible. You're now seeing the father, "I have no responsibility. He paid for it with his own money." Well, obviously those are thoughts of somebody who is tone deaf to life. His son just created a mass-casualty situation, killing, paralyzing, destroying families. This guy said, "I didn't do anything. He paid for it with his own money." I mean, okay, let's forget about him. He talks about he's not going anywhere. He is going to keep his head up high in Highland Park. Okay, there's something wrong with those comments, obviously. That's part of the reason why his son went up on top of a building with an AR-type rifle and destroyed bodies, destroyed families, destroyed an eight-year-old's life. He's never going to walk again. He has a twin brother that will be playing basketball and baseball and he'll be in a wheelchair.

This happened in front of my eyes, in front of my family, in front of ... thousands of people didn't see the bodies, but they felt the horror as they were running for their lives. The other day in Philadelphia, when the shots rang out at a, whatever, a gathering. Now it's 15, 16, 14 year olds bringing handguns to public spaces. Well, when they fire them in the air, everyone runs. Thank God somebody didn't have an AR-15 there. I guess it's hard to walk into a big space with that gun, but he opens fire, he creates a mass-casualty situation. Handguns aren't going away. I wish they would, but not a weapon made to maim and kill.

It's mind-boggling. It's mind-boggling. Giving that gun to that child obviously happened for lots of things that are now well-chronicled about the family and the dysfunction and he had academic issues. He had a family that obviously didn't know exactly what to do with him when he was offered services in school. Maybe he was bullied, but you can't change that. You can't fix that overnight. Those are generational issues. But, what is immediate is the access that was so easy to legally purchase that weapon. It's just he drove up to Madison, didn't have a good plan. I mean, he could have done the same thing at a big gathering. It's just hard to believe. It's hard to believe.

Larry Bernstein:
David, thank you.

Larry Bernstein:
I would like to turn now to David's daughter Brittany. You marched in the Highland Park Parade with your son, and you were present when the shooting started. What happened?

Brittany Wroblewski:

Yeah. Unfortunately, my family was at the wrong place at the wrong time, but luck aligned for us in almost every way. If you would've altered one detail, our fate would've been very, very different. But on the 4th of July, we had what I would describe as boring suburban plans. Our plan was to take our two-year-old to the Highland Park parade and then have a family barbecue. My husband and I both actually grew up in Highland Park and we made a very intentional choice to move to Highland Park and raise our family in Highland Park because it's such a wonderful and beautiful community. So, growing up, I used to do the Highland Park children's parade which starts 30 minutes before the main parade does at 10:00 AM. And this year, I was telling Chris, it's really nostalgic for me to be a parent now in the parade and walking Blake down and all the kids decorate their bicycles and their tricycles.

My son who's two decorated a little lawnmower that he likes to push and it blows bubbles. And we were walking, waving to tons of community members who we know, family, friends, classmates, families of his. And my son who's two couldn't do the whole loop. It was just too much for him. So, we detoured and cut out early to go meet my family who was Blake's cheering section outside of our local Dairy Queen lined up. And we had just gotten to my parents' blanket and chairs and everyone was hugging Blake and telling him what a good job he did marching. And just as the official parade was getting started, we just heard these loud consecutive pops that happened so fast. Everyone just kind of like froze. And there was this haze of confusion. And diagonal from me across the street I saw people begin to jump up and spring up. I looked at my husband who already had Blake in his hands and we just started to run. And-

Larry Bernstein:

Where did you run?

Brittany Wroblewski:

We didn't know. We just ... Away. We just ran. We ran just away from the main parade area. And in that moment I just knew I was going to be separated from the rest of my family.

Larry Bernstein:

Was it complete chaos?

Brittany Wroblewski:

It was complete chaos. Within seconds, we knew it was a gun, we knew it was a shooter. And we just started running. And when we made a right by the train tracks, the second round of shots happened and the fear that I had in that moment and your body's and your mind is just not connected. Your body is just moving so fast and running. And the instincts, the survival, I mean, my heart rate is so high just talking about it right now. And then your mind begins to catch up and I'm starting to think where's my family. There's people screaming. There's elderly people trying to get away. There's kids crying. It was just a whirl a fear that I really don't wish on anyone ever and certainly a child.

Larry Bernstein:

I grew up in Glencoe in a town that borders Highland Park. We were both raised in this community and attended the same synagogue. I went to the Glencoe parade as a child and as a young parent. You've been a lifelong Highland Park resident. You attended Highland Park High School, and you made the decision to raise your family in Highland Park. You live just a few blocks away from the shooting incident. There was a belief that Glencoe and Highland Park are totally safe; it is like Mayberry. Nothing bad ever happens in Highland Park. What is it like to find out that you are unsafe here?

Brittany Wroblewski:

What is safe anymore? I don't know. Parades aren't safe, schools aren't safe, concerts aren't safe. We allow people to buy legally in this country and arrive at schools with and parades. This guy, this deranged 21-year-old did not break a law in America until he opened fire on the parade. And no place is immune because no one has a chance against an AK-15. The police, there were hundreds of police at the parade. The police literally marched through the parade. There were military members who had just marched through the parade. They are outgunned. And the whole thing Larry, started and ended in 20 seconds. You blinked and this guy took seven lives, wounded over 40 and shattered a whole community. That's it. It's not about the location, it's about how these guns get to the locations. And the only way to make Highland Park, Glencoe, the south side of Chicago, I mean any neighborhood is unsafe until we ban assault weapons. This isn't a Democrat/Republican issue, this is a public safety issue.

Larry Bernstein:

I was in New York City on 9/11. I saw with my own eyes when the Twin Towers came down. It was quite a shock. There was a sense of vulnerability and that the world had changed in that moment when those buildings came down. One big difference with 9/11 was that we were attacked by foreign Arab terrorists. What's strange about this incident in Highland Park is that the killer was someone who lived among us. One of his parents lives a couple blocks away from you. He attended your high school. His father had a delicatessen that recently closed but was just a few blocks away from your house. The murderer's dad ran for mayor. He is one of us. How do you think about it that this guy lived right down the street?

Brittany Wroblewski:

Yeah, I think it makes the idea of access to assault weapons just more prominent. This guy had the same schooling. He grew up in the same safe community. Like nature versus nurture. I shared a lot of similar experience than this kid, this 21-year-old. The internet and social media changed the way people can share ideas, both good and bad, but access to a weapon that caused so much havoc and destruction so quickly, to me is the piece of the puzzle that brought this on. I do. I'm not saying that a dangerous person with horrible intentions is not going to find a way to carry out a horrible plan. The 70 rounds he shot in 20 seconds is unlike anything. No one has a chance.

The bottom line is when a military grade weapon gets into the hands outside of the military, it's criminal grade. There's nothing else to do with an AK-15. There's no sport, there's no hunting, it

is just meant to devastate communities and ruin lives. If he would've had to reload, if he didn't have that type of bullet and speed, lives would've been saved. I'm not saying that no horrible event would've happened at the parade, I'm saying that some lives could have been saved. There could have been a minute where police could have oriented themselves to realize where the hell the guy ... I mean, you couldn't even blink, Larry. And the whole thing had started and finished and our community is forever changed. There's a boy who's my son's age, Blake's age, and he lost both of his parents at the parade.

Larry Bernstein:
I know, it's terrible.

Brittany Wroblewski:
Yeah. I mean, there's not even words to just ... I don't have the stomach to digest that yet. I don't know if I ever will, but ...

Larry Bernstein:
Your dad David Baum ran to help the victims. I know you've got mixed feelings about that. Tell me you felt when you found out that he put himself in harm's way.

Brittany Wroblewski:
Hmm. This one's been a journey over the last 48 hours. The day of the shooting, I'll be honest, I was mad at him. Because in the chaos after, my husband, Blake and I were able to get to our car. And again, I said at the beginning, there were a million things that could have gone differently for us that would've changed our fate. Where we parked our car was one of those weird details where we were able to run directly to our car. And we sped out of the town area like a getaway car. I was laying in the back seat with Blake. So, he wasn't by a window. So, back to your question, when we got into the car, I'm calling my family. No one's answering, I'm getting voicemails. I'm hysterical. I'm thinking horrible things. And finally, I get a hold of my sister, "Is everyone okay?" "Everyone's okay, but dad is on the corner helping victims." And I just lost it. I was like, "Get him out of there. What is he doing? Where are you? Why aren't you guys together?"

They wouldn't leave without my dad so they're hanging on the side of the ... They were in a safe place. Now that I've had a couple days to digest and I came around hours later, but I think anyone who has a hero like my father in their family, anyone who has someone in their family who's served, who's a first responder, a police officer, whatever, I guess I just got like a taste of that, of what it feels like to have a real hero in your family and someone who puts their life at risk. And my dad's a really special person. He's always been my role model before this incident, this terror. But yeah, as a daughter, I'm not ... As a daughter I wasn't suggesting that he go back into the chaos and the unknown, but also as a daughter, I'm really proud. And he says he wouldn't have changed the thing that he did. And he wanted to set the example to us kids that if you have value and something to contribute in a moment of chaos and need, you should do your part. And my dad's a physician. He's served our community for 33 years. And he absolutely did his part.

Larry Bernstein:

I thought it was amazing that the police were able to find this criminal so quickly afterwards. Any thoughts on your Highland Park Police Department?

Brittany Wroblewski:

Well, if it's so easy to buy an assault rifle, it's really easy to track who buys them. So, yeah, isn't that just a sick irony? He left the gun there. The gun has a serial number which is registered to Bobby Crimo, and they were at his house in hours. It's too easy on both sides. The fact it's almost like proving the point. It's the inverse proof of the point, right? It's so easy to purchase it therefore it's so easy to find the person who purchased it. It's wrong and it all kind of came full circle. Don't get me wrong, I slept better that night and every night since knowing that this criminal is caught, but in reality, no part of the process should have been that easy, from buying it to finding him.

Larry Bernstein:

Brittany, I end each episode of mine on a note of optimism, what are you optimistic about?

Brittany Wroblewski:

I'm optimistic about the really angry fed up had enough young people. And I grew up in Highland Park, you grew up in Glencoe. When we were growing up, school parades, they were safe and they were fun, and they were full of joyous memories and I just know that I'm part of a community that is going to get back to a point where our kids have wonderful school days and parade days, and summers full of bubble lawnmowers and barbecues. And it's going to be a long road. We're in it for the long run, but I'm really inspired by just the Highland Park community and the way that HP has come together, HP strong. And to be clear, there's no silver lining in what happened though, Larry. Sorry to take your note of optimism, there is no silver lining in this. This was a horror tragedy. Seven lives were lost. There is no silver lining, period, new sentence. I am inspired by my community who's come together under just unspeakable circumstances. So, we'll change things.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to David and Brittany for joining us today.

That ends this session. If you missed last week's show, check it out.

The topic was the future of the city. Our speaker was Deyan Sudjic who is the former director of the Design Museum in London and the author of the book the Language of Cities.

The discussion included excerpts from previous episodes including Howard Husock from AEI about the poor side of town, Mitchell Schwarzer who is an architecture professor who discussed the problems of the not in my back yard paradigm, and Edward Glaeser at Harvard who told us about why cities are the center for economic growth.

I would like to now make a plug for next week's show.

Our first speaker will be Michele Margolis who is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Michele has a new book entitled *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*.

Our second speaker will be Julian Zelizer who is the Malcolm Stevenson Forbes, Class of 1941, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University. He has a book entitled *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich and the Rise of the New Republican Party*.

You can find all of our previous episodes and transcripts on our website, Whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Replays are also available on Apple Podcast, Podbean and Spotify.

Thanks to our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.