**LEGACY SPEECH**

**FOR**

**ELVIS CROSS**

Hello everyone. It is no secret that in the times within which we are living, news travels fast and opinion seems to travel even more quickly. Every minute of every day we have the ability to hear what is going on and to react, whether we understand and agree, or not. There are so many resources that deliver the news that it is getting more and more difficult to determine what’s true or to consider if what we read and hear are events we can support or if they are injustices we cannot tolerate. While in most cases it is interesting and helpful to be able to receive so much news and information at such a rapid pace, we also must realize that as we form opinions as quickly, we must learn to be considerate of others who, at the same time, are forming and expressing their own opinions. If everyone is shouting at the same time to be heard, all we will have is noise and chaos. We need to have discussion.

There are so many really serious, critical problems facing civilization in these times. People are being senselessly killed or alienated from society. The only way we will conquer the prejudice and hatred that seems to be growing is to talk to one another, to have respectful debate and conversation in order to find peaceful solutions so that we can all coexist in this world.

Gun possession is one of the topics that tend to polarize people. What is the reality and what can be done to really identify the issue and find a common ground? The gun homicide rate in England is about one for every 1 million people. In a population of 56 million, that adds up to about 50 to 60 gun killings annually. While in the US, there are about 160 times more gun homicides than England which is roughly six times smaller in population. According to an article in the New York Times, in 2014, the FBI reported **8124 gunshot homicides** in the United States that year. Gun ownership in England is also far lower than in the U.S. as well. On average, England has 6.5 guns per 100 people, compared to America, which has 101 guns per 100 people.

In 1996, after a mass shooting at a school in England, the British government pursued legislative bans on assault rifles and handguns and tightened background checks for other types of firearms. Between 1996 and 2013, a total of 200,000 guns and 700 tons of ammunition were taken off British streets due to the ban. All military-style weapons and most handguns were banned. The U.S. has not yet taken any similar actions

The probability is that a small section of the population would harm people with fire arms if given the chance. So why don't we remove assault rifles, machine guns and hand guns from the general populations as The British government did? Is it because of the horrific amount of damage a small group of people can inflict on the general population? Is it because of the cost financially and socially to our communities? Does it have to do with overly powerful organizations that lobby the government to maintain the use of firearms for private citizens in order to interpret the second amendment of the U.S. Constitution? Governments in countries like Australia and England have restricted the access of firearms to the general population to protect their people from the harm that can come from a small percentage of the population that can’t be trusted. When will we be able to have the uncomfortable and difficult yet valuable and productive conversation about this threat to the safety and well being of innocent people?

There are other threats to communities around the world, and those are based on false or exaggerated perceptions of cultures that may be different than what we’ve known. Throughout the world we have been hearing of incidents involving people that seem to stem from one particular religion whose violent interpretation of a peaceful culture incites fear and hate and causes death and destruction around the world.

There are an estimated 1.8 billion Muslims throughout the world, comprising about 24% of the global population. According to a Pew Research poll from 2011, of those 1.8 billion people, about 106,000 worldwide are actually actively engaging in extremist violence. Such a minute fraction of the world Muslim population are those violent extremists but the damage they have done is horrific and the potential of that hate spreading is terrifying.

How can we overcome prejudice and have a conversation about inclusion without victimizing the innocent or alienating the majority of the population of a culture and religion who are not engaged in violence? Do any of us have the right to ask them to dilute or abandon their faith to conform to others’ stereotypes and preconceived notions? How would we feel if the same were done to us?

How do we involve everybody concerned in urgently needed conversation without shouting them down or physically attacking them if we don’t agree with their point of view? Violence has never been a solution. We can see that in news videos showing people covering their faces while being punched and kicked while involved in peaceful protests. We are living in the “era of YouTube.” There are people that attempt to record inaccuracies that create more controversy and all that only causes more of a divide and more hate. Who do we believe? Those who are retaliating or those that believe that violence is justifiable? In the end, violence is violence and it's harmful to both the perpetrator and the victim and is ugly in all its forms.

Freedom of speech is essential for people to be able to express their concerns out in the open without fear of being humiliated or harmed because one doesn't believe the popular point of view of the day. Fears and prejudice can be allayed through respectful and open discussion, education, debate, and sharing of facts. A commitment to speaking and learning the facts… the TRUTH… can conquer ignorance and resolve frustration. Imagine if those issues can be handled, then people might have the opportunity to make informed choices when it's time to vote. It is urgent that people make informed choices and opinions about “hot button” topics by researching within known and reliable sources, by checking several sources before forming and spreading opinions, and by having open and constructive debate with those with whom we may disagree. There will always be people that want to spew hate and ignorance. The only way to conquer that is to shine the light on actual facts.

My parents’ generation have a very difficult task at hand. They must find a way to have the difficult conversations. In a free country, everyone has the right to speak, but that freedom is at risk. There is a very real danger in the world and we all need to have open and honest debate about how we can preserve and inherit a legacy without fear while we nurture an atmosphere of inclusion, respect, and diversity for ourselves and future generations.

Thank you.