

Find the Helpers

An Interview with Fred Guttenberg, Founder, Orange Ribbons For Jaime and Orange Ribbons For Gun Safety

EDITORS' NOTE Fred Guttenberg began his public life after the murder of his 14-year-old daughter, Jaime, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The day after the murder, Guttenberg attended a public vigil in Parkland where the Mayor asked him to speak. His words shook a nation. Only four months prior to this, Fred Guttenberg's brother, Michael, passed away from cancer related to his service in 9/11. Following his involvement in these two distinctly American tragedies, Guttenberg has traveled the country talking about both events, but also talking about perspective, perseverance and resilience. He discusses pivotal moments in a person's life and how we respond to those moments. His mission ultimately led him to write the book, *Find The Helpers*. Guttenberg's previous professional life included more than a decade of experience in sales and management with Johnson & Johnson, followed by almost 15 years as an entrepreneur with 19 Dunkin' Donuts, which he sold in November 2016.



Fred Guttenberg

ORGANIZATION BRIEFS Orange Ribbons For Jaime (orangeribbonsforjaime.org) is a 501(c)(3) foundation whose purpose is to support causes important to Jaime during her life, but also causes that deal with the way her life was tragically cut short. It looks to make donations to organizations supporting individuals with special needs, addressing animal causes, helping the dance community, providing educational scholarships, and assisting families affected by gun violence.

Orange Ribbons For Gun Safety's mission is to reduce gun violence by advocating for policies and candidates who believe in common-sense gun safety and to make the Orange Ribbon the symbol of the gun safety movement. Orange Ribbons for Gun Safety is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization.

Will you tell your story and discuss how your personal connection to two American tragedies led to your current mission and purpose?

I would need to begin in late 2016. I was a Dunkin' Donuts franchisee and I had just sold my business. This was going to be the first time since I was 13 years old that I would wake up in the morning and have nothing to do, which I

am not very good at. My focus immediately became by brother who, at the time, was living in New York and was struggling with cancer that was related to his service in 9/11. He was a physician at the time of the World Trade Center attack and was Deputy Medical Director of the New York Fire Department. My brother was in the World Trade Center at the time of its collapse and survived the tragedy of that day. In 2013 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, underwent treatment, and seemed fine for a few

years until the cancer came back in 2016.

After I sold my business, I spent the better part of the next year going back and forth from my home in Florida to New York to help to take care of my brother who was single and did not have kids. This was my purpose for that year. I got my real estate license during this time thinking it may be work I could do around my trips to see my brother since I needed something professionally to keep me challenged. My brother died on October 17, 2017 of cancer related to 9/11, and after we returned to Florida from the funeral, I told my wife that I had to find something to do. I was thinking about possible jobs and businesses, but my wife told me I should take the remaining two months of the year off since she felt I needed a break. I remember telling one of my closest friends that I was going crazy and needed to find something to do and he told me that I would figure it out. I never expected that I would figure it out the way that I did.

On February 14, 2018, I sent my two children to school. I sent them on Valentine's Day, a day of love, and they were running late that morning. I rushed them out the door and my last words to my children that day were, "you got to go, you are going to be late" – it was not "I love you." It was not supposed to be the last time I would speak to my daughter. My children that day were involved in a shooting. My daughter was murdered at the school that day and my son, while on the telephone with me hysterical and running, was telling me that he was hearing bullets. Those were the bullets that were coming from the third floor that were killing his sister.

My family went from one American tragedy to another only four months later and my life has never been the same. In the immediate

aftermath of my daughter's death, my world was spinning. I had to plan a funeral, I had to take care of my family, and it had not really hit me yet that this was a result of gun violence. That changed the night of the 15th when I went to a vigil in Parkland. When I got there, the Mayor asked me to speak and I stood in front of the crowd and saw thousands of people holding candles and crying, and it was in that moment that it became clear to me that my life was forever changed because of gun violence. A week later I went to a CNN town hall and confronted Senator Marco Rubio from Florida and since that time I have not shut up – this is my life now.

When you came to this realization, how did you figure out what to do next?

It just came to me. Orange was my daughter Jaime's favorite color, and she was a competitive dancer. The day that she was killed, on February 14, all the girls from her dance studio began making orange ribbons and the next day they came over to our home. The kids marched into Jaime's room crying and had brought with them thousands of orange ribbons for us to pass out at the funeral. From that day forward, my family and I wore an orange ribbon every single day. About three weeks after Jaime was killed, I was in a Home Depot and all the signage for Home Depot is orange. Someone came up to me and asked what the orange ribbon was for and I explained to them what happened to my daughter and why I wear it. This person, someone I had never met, asked me if I knew that orange was the color of the gun safety movement. I had no idea since I was really not part of the movement yet.

I went home that day and told my wife that we needed to start a foundation and that it needed to be Orange Ribbons For Jaime. We could not ignore the connection between Jaime's favorite color, what had happened to Jaime, and the fact that it is the color of the gun safety movement. I started to reach out to people who had experience in setting up foundations, and my cousin connected me to a law firm that sets these up and helped walk me through the process. This was all the business side of it. I still did not know exactly what the foundation was going to do, but I knew I had to do it. As I was going through the process, it became clear to me and to my wife what the purpose of the foundation should be – we wanted this foundation to honor the things that

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mattered to Jaime’s life, and we also wanted to educate on the issues around why Jaime’s life was cut short.

Orange Ribbons For Jaime was created as a 501(c)(3) which is not intended to be political and not meant to advocate for laws. The foundation supports children with special needs, which is something that Jaime was already doing at the age of 14 in volunteering her time and hoping to one day become a pediatric physical therapist. We support antibullying programs because for my daughter, this was a passion and, even at the tender age of 14, she would literally put herself in between bullies and someone they were bullying to make it stop. We support the humane society because we are a dog obsessed family, my daughter especially so. The foundation also has a college scholarship program and even though my daughter will never have the opportunity to attend college, she will help others go to college. Most recently, we announced a partnership with José Andrés’ World Central Kitchen to start a program to feed families impacted by gun violence. These families live in communities across this country and have lost a breadwinner or have a family member who is not able to return to work. This partnership will become the signature cause of our foundation and, going forward, we will be there for those families in need.

I realized some of the limitations of a 501(c)(3) as we were doing the work of the foundation since I was personally becoming very politically active. I was traveling across the country and pushing legislators and legislation, and going everywhere I could to address voters about the issues they were going to be voting on. I knew that I needed to set up another entity that would allow me to do this which is what led to the creation of Orange Ribbons For Gun Safety which is a 501(c)(4) and is able to fulfill this purpose.

There are many different terms used around the issue of gun violence. What do you feel is the best way to address this issue and how do you define the effort?

That is an important question since the most commonly used term is gun control which I hate. There is nothing that we do that is gun control – we are not trying to control anybody. We are trying to save lives. I use the term gun safety often but still feel this is not the best term since we are not at a place where we have safety. I feel that the best term is gun

violence prevention. As a movement, we are getting much better at messaging since in the past the term gun control was commonly used but, to be honest, gun control is a term that is most used by the people on the other side of the issue. Language matters and it is critical that this movement better expresses what it is focused on doing in a clear and concise way. It is time to stop arguing the gun violence prevention movement as a Second Amendment issue, because it is not. Saving lives is not a Second Amendment conversation. The reality is that there are already 400 million weapons on the streets – that is a fact. The question is how are we going to lessen the gun violence that occurs and what are we going to do when an incident happens – that is a public health conversation.

What more can be done to build a better awareness around gun violence prevention as a public health issue?

When we have conversations like this, we need to talk about the country and where voters are, and what the current state of Washington, DC is. The majority of Americans want to see gun violence prevention measures happen. The majority of Americans feel that we, as a country, need to be better at saving lives that might be lost as the result of gun violence. I feel this message is getting through among voters and that this was loud and clear in the last two elections. In 2018, the House flipped primarily on this issue and, in 2020, a President was elected who ran heavily on this issue while the Senate became 50/50 with Democratic control largely because of this issue. This was a big issue in the past two elections. The reality is that while this is true, it has not been enough to move legislation in Washington, DC, and this is a breakdown.

Having said that, we need to focus on how to bring down gun violence, and this means including public health entities and the business community in this fight. Through my ongoing work with the gun violence prevention group Brady, we are engaged with some of the top business leaders right now discussing the risk and cost of gun violence. They need to understand that due to bad legislation or no legislation, the cost has effectively been passed on to them. Business owners now carry the risk when gun violence happens – just look at the hotel in Las Vegas that paid more than \$800 million because it happened at their property. We are working with the business community to better understand this risk

and to take steps – whether it relates to training, policy manuals, lobbying – in order to build more engagement since there is so much the business community can do to drive action on this issue.

When it comes to legislation, you have said that “we are closer than we have ever been to the ability to take legislative action against gun violence, however we are also closer than we have ever been to permanently losing the ability to do so.” Will you discuss this moment in time?

I look across this country and I see states like New Jersey where my friend Governor Phil Murphy has led the effort that has resulted in the passing of amazing legislation, as has New York, California, and Pennsylvania. Some states, such as Massachusetts and Maryland, have done so with Republican governors. These states have passed gun violence prevention legislation and they are seeing a reduction in gun violence. In fact, when guns are being used in crimes in those states, they are often coming in from outside the state. It is clear that what they are doing is working. However, this is the reason we need federal legislation since you are only as safe as your closest border. The idea that we argue over background checks and can’t have red flag laws is unbelievable to me.

We are closer than we have ever been to getting gun safety legislation, but yes, we are also closer than we have ever been to losing the chance. We currently have a President that would sign legislation if it came to his desk. We have a House of Representatives that is debating and passing legislation. We also have a Senate that is stuck at 50/50, so they can’t get anything passed. This is much closer than where we were when my daughter was killed in 2018. If someone would have told me back in 2018 that we would be as close as we are today, I would have said no way, but here we are. The challenge is that this country has changed over the past few years and people’s perspectives on democracy have changed as well.

The reality is that if the Democrats hold the House and increase seats in the Senate, gun violence prevention legislation can pass. Having said that, I am a realist and know that if the Democrats lose the House and lose seats in the Senate, not only will we lose the immediate chance to pass gun violence prevention legislation, we may permanently lose the chance to do so. The truth is that being as close as we are to getting something done and being as close as we

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are to losing the chance does not just pertain to gun violence prevention legislation, it pertains to so many things that matter so deeply to so many Americans. This is why anyone who knows me understands my push for all Americans to show up and vote.

What interested you in writing the book, *Find the Helpers*, and what messages did you want to convey in the book?

Before my daughter was killed, I was not someone who did a lot of writing. When I was planning Jaime’s funeral, the funeral director handed me a journal and asked me if I had ever journaled before. I advised him that I had not, and he told me to take the journal as a gift from him and to promise him that I would do it. I did not think much about it until a week later when we all started to try to find our new normal, and I pulled out the journal and started journaling. Writing very quickly became my therapy. This was in February 2018 and two months later I told my wife that I wanted to write a book about our story of being a part of two American tragedies and how this country responded differently to both. That was the book I wanted to write and I worked with someone for the next six to eight months doing interviews and putting it together. I shared the transcript with someone who I trust deeply and is in the publishing business and he handed it back to me and told me I was not done writing. I said that this was my story and that I had nothing additional to say. He felt that I had written amazing stories throughout the book about other people, but that they were limited and that readers would want to know more. He also said that all the people highlighted in the book seemed like “helpers” and that was the moment when things became clear for me.

I thought about growing up and hearing Mr. Rogers’ famous advice to look for the helpers when he said,

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” The key message is that as long as there are helpers, there is hope. My book was ultimately about how I went from these tragedies to hope, and the person in the book who really got me to the place to understand how to talk about helpers wasn’t related to February 14 – she was related

to 9/11. There was a lady who saved my family that day. We knew my brother was always the person who would run toward a tragedy while others ran away – that is just how he was wired. When our family did not hear from him on the morning of 9/11, we knew where he was. By early that afternoon, when we still had not heard from him, we began to think the worst. By mid-afternoon, we started to prepare ourselves for the worst. At around 4:00 PM that day, a lady called my parents. This amazing lady had gone by where the triage was set up at Battery Park with a book and a pen and went to all of the first responders asking for a name and telephone number of someone to call for them. This amazing lady called my parents, did not give her name, and told them that she had spoken to their loved one and that he was alive and working and that he would call us when he could. That was the sign of life we had about my brother that day. This lady, to me, is the ultimate helper, and I do not even know her. She is a hero. She helped many families that day and yet is completely anonymous. All these years later, I love to talk about her because of how meaningful she was, and what I realized with her was the need to go through all the people in my book and talk about their impact on me.

I realized that there was not a single thing that I had done in my life, good or bad, that was just because of me. I have not done anything in my life without the amazing help and support of other people, and I think that is probably true of anybody who wants to be honest about their life. I am so thankful for the amazing people who have helped and carried me throughout my life, whether they are my friends, my neighbors or, in the case of when my daughter was murdered, all of the people who became a part of my life. I could not get through this without them and because of these amazing people throughout my entire life, I continue to have hope despite what happened. ●

“Powerful and heartening lessons on how we can help one another move forward and build a safer, more just world.” —Gabby Giffords

FRED GUTTENBERG’S FIND THE HELPERS



What 9/11
and Parkland
Taught Me
About
Recovery,
Purpose,
and Hope

Foreword by **Bradley Whitford**