

Later this year, Maryland will become the first state in nearly twenty years to require people who buy a handgun to submit fingerprints to state police. Only five other states have a similar requirement: Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey. The measure also limits gun magazines to ten bullets and addresses firearms access for the mentally ill, in that those individuals who have been involuntarily committed to a mental health facility won't be allowed to legally own a gun.

Naturally, this has sparked intense reactions on both sides of the gun debate. Maryland's Eastern Shore is well-known for its history of hunting and outdoorsmanship. Surely any threat to the weapons-related rights of responsible gun owners, in Easton and elsewhere, would be met with powerful disapproval. I found myself immediately wanting to speak with a gun owner; someone who would share with me their knowledge about the topic and the gun culture in general. I was lucky enough to chat with the owner of Albright's Gun Shop in downtown Easton, Mr. Larry Albright.

"First of all, you have to start with the fact that the tragedies that have happened across the country affect anyone in the gun industry. Just because we sell guns doesn't mean we don't have hearts," explains Albright. "Newtown and events such as these, because we're so close to it, are absolutely devastating. That's number one."

"We have people with serious mental health issues purchasing guns without law enforcement knowing about it," says Albright. "That's a huge problem, and most of us don't think that the media is doing a good job spelling that fact out."

This is true, too. While the major news outlets repeatedly report on the status of the gun debate amongst politicians, the mentally unstable and overcrowded American penitentiary system seemingly continue to go undiscussed and unreported. Reactionary news opposed to getting to the core of the problems, if you will.

Adds Albright, "Until we get to better handling of the mental health-aspect of it, as well as the violent repeat offender, who account for the vast majority of violent attacks with a gun, we are wasting time and endangering our public, our children. The misinformation [by the media] is horrible." Albright goes on to explain that he no longer debates or tries to change the minds of those who are strongly anti-gun in position. "But what I try to do," explains Albright, "is say that, if you're going to just make statements, go get informed and do your homework. Find out where you really stand, rather than just where you think you stand because you've only relied on the media for your information."

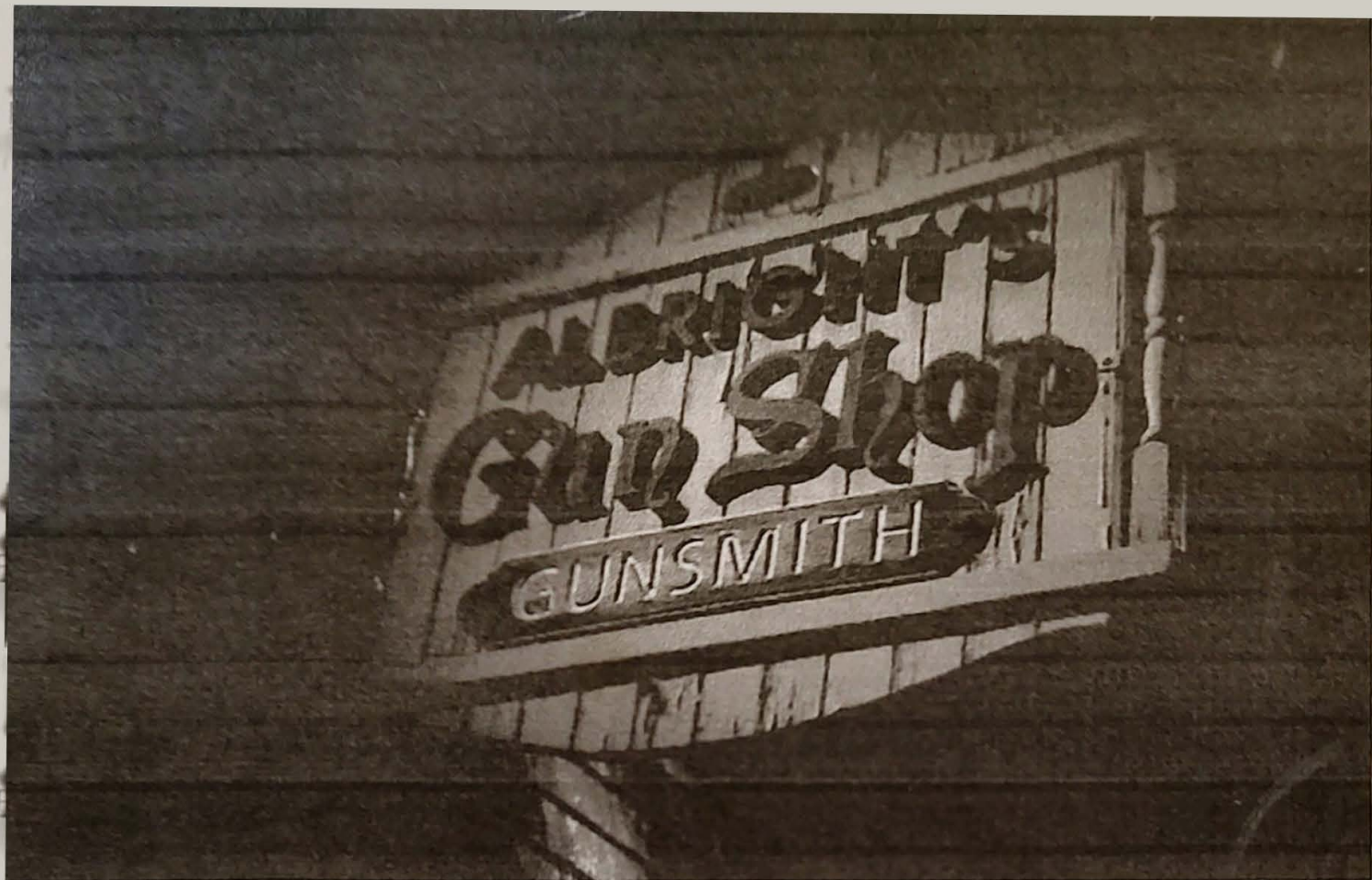
Not surprisingly I suppose, all of the gun talk in Annapolis, in our living rooms, and on the streets has led to big business for gun shops like Albright's. "The focus is on guns right now—all guns, not just assault rifles, but handguns and long guns—customers are buying everything," says Albright.

"What's happening now is, the number of common sense, everyday residents—moms, 'soccer moms', if you will, fathers of young children—have come out of the woodwork, who I have never seen in my thirty years in business, they are walking in the shop and saying the same thing. They're saying exactly what we've been talking about today," answers Albright. "And that is, until we get our mental health and violent repeat offenders under control, the laws that they're talking about now are not going to change or wouldn't have changed what happened in Connecticut."

Albright's is currently celebrating their thirtieth anniversary located on Dover Street in Easton. Larry Albright is also the chairman of the Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage and is a staunch conservationist. Albright's has a stellar reputation up and down the East Coast, I have discovered.

While the gun debate will surely rage on between politicians and those of us who feel passionately about the topic, hearing a local voice helps shift the conversation from TV soundbites back to our own community.





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Probably, like many other Eastern Shore transplants who have never hunted, nor suffered the unfortunate experience of having been mugged, I do not currently own a gun.

My father, who lives in Florida, owns two guns. I remember being a teenager and having him show me them one day. I was shocked, not even knowing he was a gun owner nor interested in them in the slightest. But after some questioning as to how long he's had them and why, he responded simply, "If I hear someone break in the house in the middle of the night, I'm shooting first and asking questions later."

"I struggled a bit with the explanation, probably because I had seen one too many after-school specials involving an accidental child/gun accident -- that, and the fact that I'm essentially a pacifist at heart. I mean, Dad owning and (potentially) shooting a gun? At a person? When did dad become Charlie Bronson?!

Then I had children; and then Newtown happened. Feelings about protecting my loved ones juxtaposed with what my core beliefs were and what I would pass down to my two young boys had me in a tizzy. What really is "common sense" when it comes to the gun debate?

Earlier this month Maryland's General Assembly passed gun legislation, spearheaded by Gov. Martin O'Malley, in reaction to the Newtown massacre. The result was our state's already-considered-strong gun laws became amongst the strictest in the nation. But are guns to blame? Or is it our lack of a mental health awareness/treatment that is more in question? Perhaps it is both?