

Combating gun violence

HAMILTON RN TURNS GRIEF INTO ACTION.

ON A FALL EVENING IN 1996, Karen Vanscoy's 14-year-old daughter, Jasmine, was shot dead by a 17-year-old male acquaintance with an untreated mood disorder. Jasmine's eight-year old brother witnessed the tragedy in the family's living room.

"The boy who killed my daughter accessed the (unregistered) gun from his stepfather's unlocked kitchen cabinet," Vanscoy says.

Since that horrific night 16 years ago, Vanscoy has worked as a determined advocate for gun control and victims' rights. A long-time member of the *Coalition for Gun Control*, she is regularly interviewed by Ontario's media and meets with politicians to endorse strong gun controls. She also attends press conferences and campaigns across the province to provide the victim perspective. As a nurse, she adds important insight to the cause. In 2010, she joined 500 colleagues to sign an RNAO action alert calling on the federal government to defeat Bill C-19, *Ending the Long-Gun Registry Act*.

Much of Vanscoy's advocacy over the past few years has focused on Bill C-19, which received royal assent by the federal Conservatives in the spring of 2012. The passing of this *Act* means gun owners are no longer required to register shotguns or rifles. It has also led to the destruction of gun registry data, including past records, in all but one province in Canada.*

This is "a real setback," she says. "Over 70 per cent of gun fatalities...are done with shotguns."

Vanscoy admits her fight for stricter gun controls did not start immediately following her daughter's death. In fact, soon after the tragedy, she left nursing, convinced she would never return.

Vanscoy looks back, recalling the start of her career at 21.

Vanscoy says. Employed by the Canadian Mental Health Association in 1995, she worked in soup kitchens and shelters. In 1996, she helped start Niagara Falls' first *Out of the Cold Program* for the homeless.

Following Jasmine's death that year, Vanscoy says her enthusiasm for mental health nursing waned. "My daughter was murdered by someone who had serious mental health

daughter's murder was an isolated incident. People with mental illnesses are "more likely to be victims than to be violent." The work, she says, restored her passion for nursing.

Two years later, she returned to school to complete a BScN at McMaster University, and graduated on the dean's honour list in 2010. Today, she is a community mental health nurse in Thorold, Ontario.

Jasmine's killing prompted a political interest in gun control, but nursing helped Vanscoy to see the link between gun violence and health. "Nursing allowed me to support strong gun laws from a health and prevention perspective," she says, noting suicidal people are at significant risk if they have access to guns.

Referring to the recent wave of gun violence in the U.S., she insists strong gun controls, including gun registries, help prevent at-risk people from endangering themselves and others with a firearm.

"Stronger gun laws inform gun culture," she says. "Gun culture (can) inhibit gun violence."

Despite the destruction of Ontario's long-gun registry and records last October, Vanscoy remains hopeful her ongoing advocacy will create a culture of safety: "When you don't look at prevention as a positive way to create change, I think you're missing the mark." **RN**

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Three things you don't know about Karen Vanscoy:

1. She took roller derby classes in 2012.
2. She loves to garden.
3. She juggles.

"I wanted a profession where I could give back to the community and nursing was a natural fit," the third generation nurse says. In 1989, she graduated as a nursing assistant, and was hired by Hamilton Psychiatric Hospital (now St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton). She discovered a passion for mental health.

"As I learned more about the social injustice faced by people with mental illness...I felt I could make a difference,"

issues, and I had been caring for people with these issues," she explains. Feeling devastated and lost, she left the profession in 1998 and worked as an educational assistant. That same year, she protested at her first gun rally.

In 2001, the need for extra income prompted Vanscoy to return to nursing part time at Hamilton Program for Schizophrenia (HPS). Before long, she began to accept that her