

Armed Ann Arbor

Meet a few of the local residents who buy, sell, and carry guns



by Debbie Eisenberg Merion

Jim Trevor (not his real name), a union organizer from Wyandotte, is checking out guns at Investment Rarities of Michigan, the only store in Ann Arbor listed in the Yellow Pages under Guns & Gunsmiths. It smells smoky in the small shop two doors down from Whole Foods on East Stadium. Trevor looks to be in his late forties; a muscular man, he's neatly dressed in tan Dockers and a sport shirt and has a slightly graying ponytail. The owner of the store, Pete Linden, in his early fifties, sports a ponytail too, down to the middle of his back.

In a soft voice, Trevor asks to see one of the shotguns in the glass case. Handing it over, Linden boasts, "This has no chips or dings." Trevor opens the gun and squints through the barrel toward a light. "There's just a bit of rust in the chamber," he replies, simultaneously assessing and setting up for bargaining.

Trevor carefully hands the shotgun back to Linden as if holding a silver tray—palms up, with one hand under the barrel, the other under the stock. Next he asks to look at a handgun. Linden takes it from the case, and moments later Trevor has it disassembled and is rubbing it thoroughly, maybe even sensuously, with a grease-darkened chamois that Linden has handed to him. He takes off his glasses, peers through the six bulletless chambers, and puts the pieces back together like a big metal puzzle, smiling smugly as the last one clicks into place.

Over the next hour or so, Trevor ends up handling every gun in the shop—two handguns and three "long guns." He doesn't buy any but talks about coming back to get one. Back home, he says, he has a collection of "about fifty" guns. Even Linden seems surprised at the number. "That's an arsenal!" he says, smiling. "The person with fifty isn't the one you worry about," Trevor replies. "It's the one with one gun who doesn't know how to store it, clean it, and load it."

Trevor says he keeps his weapons locked up in gun safes. "If anyone was to break into my home, I'd probably be dead before I could get to them," he says. But he makes it clear that he wouldn't shy away from using them for self-defense if he needed to. A daughter of a friend was killed in a carjacking, he says. If she had had a gun for protection, he believes, she would be alive today.

Trevor is a hunter and a gun collec-

tor. It's a hobby, he says, "like women knitting." He taught each of his three sons how to use guns and has taken them to hunter safety classes. "I wouldn't even let them point toy guns at people," he says. "I think accidents could be avoided by educating children, and showing them damage they can inflict. But education wouldn't help what happened at Columbine. That's psychological—those kids had problems."

Since the recent string of gun-related schoolyard killings and hate crimes, guns and gun owners have attracted closer scrutiny. Although the vast majority are responsible, law-abiding citizens, guns do provide their owners with something non-gun owners don't have: an efficient, violent, intimidating method to express hatred or anger.

Although Trevor says he wouldn't use his guns in anger, and as evidence mentions a very bitter divorce that his ex-wife evidently survived, he doesn't seem totally consistent when confronted with a hypothetical situation. "If a woman in my family was being stalked, I'd follow her and catch the son of a bitch myself."

"What would you do?" I ask.

"Anything I had to," he replies protectively.

The string of killings this year has revived discussion of registering all guns as one possible answer to the problem of gun violence. This strikes fear in the hearts of gun owners like Trevor: "First thing anyone does who is a dictator is to disarm the people." If that day ever came, though, Trevor wouldn't give all of his guns up. "They know most of what I have," he says, "but not all of what I have." He'd have no qualms about concealing part of his arsenal, since he sees himself as the good guy. "Criminals are always going to have the gun," he argues. "If you take everyone's gun, that just makes it easier for criminals."

Buying a gun in Ann Arbor

No one would call Ann Arbor a great city in which to buy a gun. A casual survey of a half dozen gun owners waiting for a concealed-weapons permit found none who would buy his guns in Ann Arbor. Pete Linden, owner of Investment Rarities, says in a raspy voice that the reason there are so few gun stores is the meticulous paperwork required, not to mention the numerous regulations to abide by. "There is a book this thick with federal regulations"—he holds his thumb and forefinger two inches apart—"and this thick with Michigan regulations," he continues, narrowing the gap to one inch.

There used to be more gun shops in

town. In 1989 five stores were listed in the Yellow Pages, but that was the heyday for gun dealers in Ann Arbor. In 1979 there were two stores listed, and in 1951 just one. The listings don't include every store that sells guns, however, or even the biggest ones. According to Steven Kessler of the FBI, 15 percent of gun dealers account for 85 percent of transactions. Two big discount chains, Dunham's and Meijer, stock guns at their Ann Arbor stores, and they undoubtedly sell many more weapons than does Investment Rarities. Guns are a sideline for Linden: his main business is buying and selling coins and jewelry.

Ann Arbor might not be a big city for gun sales, but it is a city with only a few homicides per year. (There is debate on whether those facts are connected and, if so, how.) From 1996 through 1998, there were two murders in the

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city each year. The total number of incidents involving guns is considerably greater; however, not counting pellet and BB guns, the Ann Arbor police have recorded anywhere from 88 to 180 incidents annually for the past five years. About two-thirds involve handguns, with the remainder divided among rifles, shotguns, and unknown firearms.

Most efforts to regulate guns have focused on handguns. Since they're so easily concealed, they're the gun of choice for criminals, and they have fewer legitimate uses than long guns. Michigan has been doing background checks on handgun buyers since 1927. You can't legally purchase a handgun in this state if you are a fugitive from justice, a user of illegal drugs, or an illegal alien, or if you have been dishonorably discharged from the armed forces, have ever been convicted of domestic violence, have a restraining order against you, or have ever been convicted of a crime for which you could have been imprisoned for more than one year.

Since November 30, 1998, buyers of both handguns and long guns have undergone a federal check, too. That was the date when gun dealers began to use the new National Instant Crimi-

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nal Background Check System (NICS). A screening process designed to keep guns out of the hands of known criminals, NICS was mandated into existence by the Brady Bill in 1994. (The Brady Bill takes its name from former presidential press secretary Jim Brady, who was badly wounded in the assassination attempt against President Reagan in 1981. Brady and his wife, Sarah, have become national advocates for gun control.)

The NICS implementation date was set years in advance. Gun owner associations sent out warnings beforehand, and people who did not want to go through the background check rushed to buy guns at the last minute. "I could have sold five hundred rifles that day [before NICS took effect]," says Pete Linden. "They were lined up—not just young kids eighteen to twenty-five, there were fifty-to-seventy-year-olds too. It was pretty bizarre."

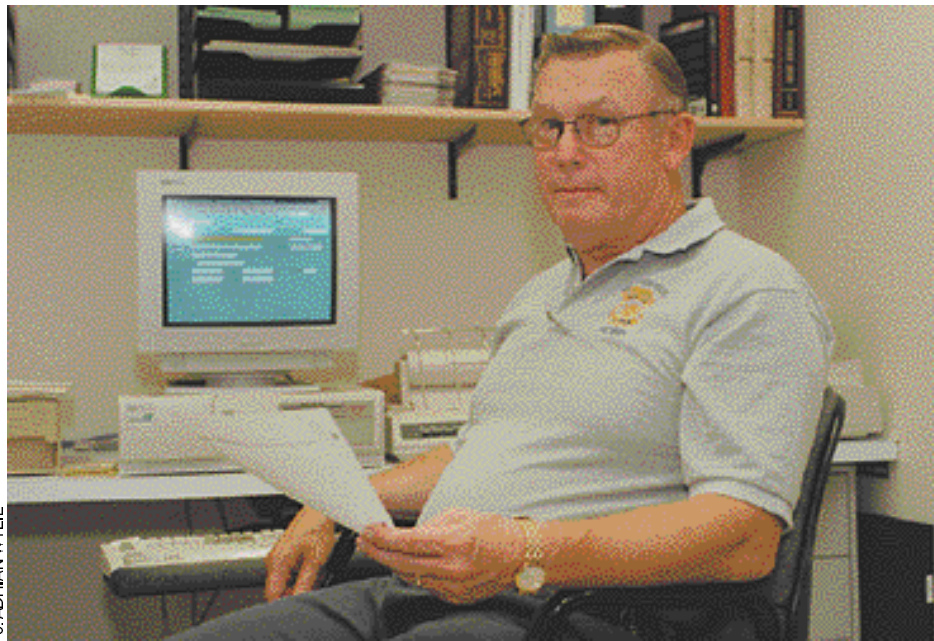
Apparently, a lot of buyers had reason to avoid NICS. Nationwide, enough convicted criminals, fugitives, and people with mental illness were prevented from buying guns during NICS's first seven months to fill Michigan Stadium. Yet those 100,000 or so people, amazingly, amounted to only about 2 percent of the total number screened.

NICS checks the background of the person purchasing a gun. But what about the gun itself? What if it was stolen? How is it traced if used in a crime? In Michigan the answers depend on whether you're talking about long guns or handguns. Records of long-gun serial numbers are kept at the store that sold the gun on a yellow form created by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. This is a decentralized, hard-to-use system for tracing gun ownership, and it suits the pro-gun folks just fine. On the other hand, handgun ownership records in Michigan have been centrally kept since 1927. Every time a handgun changes hands in Michigan or is brought into Michigan from out of state, the owner is legally required to obtain a purchase permit from the police.

In Ann Arbor, Dave Gray issues handgun purchase permits and registers guns after people buy them. A retired police detective who is now a civilian employee of the department, Gray works out of a small, windowless office in the basement of City Hall. In accordance with state law, Gray will hand you a one-page pamphlet on basic pistol safety, give you about ten minutes to study it, and then administer a fifteen-question true-false test.

A score of 70 percent is passing, and it's easy to guess the right answers to questions like "You should treat every pistol as if it were loaded" and "Possession of a pistol while under the influence of alcohol is unlawful." An elementary schoolchild could probably pass the handgun test. In fact, in the five years Gray has been administering it, no one has ever failed, though some had to take the test a second time before they passed.

After you pass the test, Gray will enter some basic information, including your name, address, race, occupation, and hair



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In Ann Arbor, Dave Gray is the man to see for a handgun permit. The state test he administers isn't hard—in the five years Gray has given it, no one has ever failed.

and eye color, into a combined state and NICS database to see whether there's anything on your record that would prevent you from legally buying a gun. For most people, the search takes less than a minute. In addition to the NICS search of crime records, the Michigan database will let Gray know if you've ever been found legally insane; such findings are so rare, however, that he has yet to have one turn up.

Gray says some people have called him, told him that they have a mentally unstable relative, and requested that he

the morning and have it legally tucked under your pillow that night.

A slice of life at Dunham's firearm counter

If you want to buy a long gun, things are even easier. You can skip the visit to Dave Gray and go straight to Dunham's Discount Sports in the Maple Village Shopping Center.

Most Dunham's customers have probably never seen the three dozen shotguns and rifles displayed in the store, because they're tucked back against a wall. They're behind a waist-high glass case holding the small stuff—a starter pistol, some pellet guns, and boxes and boxes of ammunition. The security of the case is totally superfluous, because in addition to the ammunition in the case there are hundreds of boxes small enough to slip into a shirt pocket on top of the case and on the floor in front of it.

The counter is unattended for a few minutes before a salesman comes over. He has grey hair, a trimmed beard, and a bulging waist, and looks to be in his late sixties. His name tag says "Tom."

Tom can see I'm interested in guns, and responds with a sales pitch and his own story. He tells me he is an avid hunter with three grown sons, who went with him to gun safety classes and on hunting trips.

"I got this one myself not too long ago," he says, pointing to a shotgun. At home he has half a dozen more shotguns, handguns, and rifles to keep it company, with different ranges and different ammo size requirements, for hunting different types of birds and other animals. He explains that you wouldn't use the same firearm to shoot deer that you would to shoot squirrels.

Tom asks me if I want to hold one. He unlocks the cable holding all the weapons together and hands me a rifle, with its trigger lock still in place. It feels heavy in my hands. I feel powerful, and uncomfortable. I hand it back to him, quickly.

"Aren't you worried about some nut breaking into your house and stealing your guns?" I ask. "I think everyone should be responsible for their own guns—I've got mine in a safe," he answers, motioning to

You can decide to purchase a handgun in the morning and have it legally tucked under your pillow that night.

deny a permit should the relative come in for one. The police ask that a letter be sent to them from a doctor verifying the problem; they then will honor the request if the individual comes in. And by law, Gray may withhold a permit from anyone he considers unstable. Ten years in a fraud unit and nearly thirty years as an officer have honed his ability to assess character, and he says he "would rather deny someone a permit than give them one and have something happen."

If he finds nothing wrong, Gray will take the information you've provided and print it in triplicate on a small green form called Application and License to Purchase a Pistol. After you raise your hand and swear to the validity of the information on the form, he'll give you your copy, which you will present at the store when buying your handgun. Within ten days of the purchase, you'll need to return to Gray's office so that he can take down the serial number for his records.

As Pete Linden says, the law involving gun sales is complex. But for the would-be gun owner, it's not a very big obstacle. You can decide to purchase a handgun in

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The volume seller: Dunham's small arsenal caters to the mass market.

a row of shiny, coffin-size metal boxes near the row of shotguns. But, he says, leaning over close, "I think that if that happened, at least I tried [to prevent it]."

The shotguns and rifles with green camouflage or brown wood stocks seem almost friendly next to the three matte black pump-action shotguns labeled "Home Protection Shotgun." The difference, besides color? "Home protection" shotguns have a shorter barrel, for ease of storage and also presumably because you'd be shooting an intruder at closer range than a deer. Also, Tom explains, the shorter barrel scatters the buckshot more.

The only customers this summer afternoon are two boys, both under twelve, both eyeing the BB guns. One boy is scolded and shooed away by his mother; the other's mother walks over with him and inquires about purchasing ammunition.

Just try finding a boy without a gun—a toy gun, that is. But is boys' interest in guns a stepping-stone to violence? Gun owners I interviewed taught their sons to be responsible and safe. Still, the statistics are scary: of the fourteen people highlighted in *Newsweek* last summer as involved in terrible firearm-related crimes over two years, all were males, and most were under eighteen. Six were under sixteen.

On a different summer day, I return to Dunham's. This time, I tell Tom that my interest in guns stems from an article I'm writing on the subject. At that, Tom becomes reluctant to chat. Eventually, I am told that no one at Dunham's will take responsibility and grant him permission to be formally interviewed—neither his boss, his district manager, nor Dunham's headquarters in Waterford, Michigan.

Meanwhile, I talk to Otho Ulrich. He's at Dunham's looking for a specific long gun he's been thinking about purchasing. Heavyset, with a white, slightly unkempt beard and longish hair, and dressed in a yellow polo shirt and black jeans, Ulrich could easily fit the redneck hunter stereotype—until he pulls a Palm Pilot out of his pocket.

Ulrich is a physicist, an ordnance expert who worked for KMS for years doing research for the defense industry; he now works for a KMS spin-off. He's looking

for a new rifle to take with him when he goes backpacking, mostly for personal protection. Like Tom, he keeps his guns in a safe. He has two boys, whom he has taught about firearms. "I think they need to know how to shoot and not be afraid of it, and not see it as something to be curious about," he says. "They need to see it as what it is."

Ulrich has been around guns all his life. "My grandfather had a farm, and my father had a small gun for shooting varmints—he'd shoot red squirrels that would get into his cottages and make a mess. It was just a normal thing.

"But there's so much emotion on both sides of the issue. I'm probably one of the few people who belongs to both the ACLU and NRA. I think sometimes NRA goes overboard on arguments, but the way Chicago and L.A. are suing gun makers for what is really an oversight in policing gun owners is also a travesty in some ways, because I do believe that gun laws on the books, if enforced, would serve to prevent guns from getting into the hands of dangerous people."

I ask Ulrich what he thinks about research that says that gun violence is overwhelmingly dependent on easy access to a weapon. "I wouldn't disagree," he replies, "but it's because of overaccess to illegal guns, not legal guns. The point is if the FBI and ATF did their job and policed gun dealers—that's not an insubstantial chunk of work—we'd see a lot less diverted into straw sales [legally purchased guns that are resold illegally]."

"Are you going to be a hundred percent secure and sell a gun to someone who won't go nuts next year?" Ulrich asks rhetorically. "There's no certainty. I think we should enforce laws we have before we enact more laws that may not be enforced."

Ann Arbor police lieutenant Jim Tiesman, who runs the department's major crimes unit, agrees that what's needed is stricter law enforcement—but for criminals, not gun dealers. "We have wonderful laws on paper, but ask the prosecutor's office how often people who use a firearm in a felony are charged with felony firearm [a separate offense with a two-year mandatory sentence]. With prosecu-

tors' offices in general, I know what you will find—it's not used, very rarely. It's a plea-bargaining tool." He suggests that the threat of stricter punishment might reduce gun crimes but that stricter laws won't make a dent in the problem. "You can put all the laws on the book, but they [criminals] still won't register."

"I think they need to know how to shoot and not be afraid of it, and not see it as something to be curious about."

Killed with an illegal gun

Hundreds of law-abiding citizens do register in Ann Arbor. Last year Dave Gray issued 373 licenses to purchase handguns, and 312 pistols were registered. (Those who got the license to purchase but did not register their gun either decided not to buy it, or bought it and did not register it.) From January 1 through mid-November of this year, Gray issued 327 handgun permits, and all but forty-six of those people bought the handgun and came back to register it.

But Otho Ulrich is right: some people who should be screened out still manage to obtain guns. Ann Arbor police records don't indicate what proportion of guns involved in crimes were stolen or illegally purchased. (Often the police don't know, because even when crimes with guns are solved, the weapon may not be recovered.) But one recent case that may have involved an illegally obtained gun is that of Abdul-Ghdier Elkhoja. A twenty-one-year-old Ann Arbor resident, Elkhoja is accused of fatally shooting Nicolas Seitz at a party on East University in June of this year.

Lieutenant Tieman says that had Elkhoja applied to purchase a handgun since the Brady Bill took effect, he would have been rejected. But Elkhoja apparently acquired a gun anyway—police don't yet know how. They believe that he used it after midnight in a confrontation between two groups of strangers.

The situation, as police have pieced it together, was Ann Arbor's version of the macho barroom brawl in a Western movie: it started when a man's lady was insulted, and ended when another man pulled his gun and started firing.

As reported in the *Ann Arbor News*, the fight began on the evening of June 5, when someone at the party catcalled at a woman passing by. At about three the next morning, Seitz joined the woman's boyfriend and several others who went back to resume the conflict. Elkhoja, who was attending a party across the street, became involved.

Exactly what was said and done next remains in dispute, but there is no debate about the outcome: Seitz was killed by a single gunshot wound to the chest. Elkhoja was charged with open murder and using a firearm to commit a felony. He pleaded not guilty. Currently, he is in jail awaiting trial in January. ▀



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Trucker Todd Thurkow (right) makes his case for carrying a concealed weapon.

The police know that no gun was legally registered to Elkhoja. Because he is not cooperating with the investigation, they can only guess that the weapon was borrowed or stolen. On a tip, they drained a pond near Elkhoja's northeast Ann Arbor townhouse; they found plenty of mud, but no gun.

Getting a concealed-weapons permit in Washtenaw County

Each month a dozen or so handgun owners sit knee to knee in a small waiting room in the Washtenaw County Courthouse on Huron. They're requesting what they see as the ultimate in personal protection—a permit to carry a concealed weapon. When I was there last summer, a few sweated in jackets and ties, many wore sport shirts, and tattoos decorated many arms. To get here, applicants have jumped through a number of hoops: filled out a three-page form, gotten fingerprint checks and references, paid the \$42 fee, and gotten a letter from their employer if they want to have the gun while on the job. Now they have to explain to the Washtenaw County Gun Board why they want to carry a concealed weapon legally.

When called, each person steps into a small room barely big enough for a wooden conference table with six chairs. Three men are already seated—one stocky guy in a suit and two muscular officers in uniforms, guns holstered at their sides. They're today's Gun Board: Steve Hiller, deputy chief assistant prosecutor; lieutenant Ellis Stafford, assistant post commander of the Ypsilanti post of the Michigan State Police; and sergeant Ron Owens of the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department.

Todd Thurkow, twenty-seven, a Chelsea resident with a long red ZZ Top-style beard, a red ponytail, and alert baby-blue eyes, walks in sporting a clean T-shirt and a dirty NRAcap. Thurkow is a trucker, and he wants permission to carry his pistol in his eighteen-wheeler.

"Howdy, folks. How are you doing today?" he asks the board as he walks in. His friendly good-ol'-boy confidence makes him stand out from the other, more

reserved, applicants, but has no visible effect on the Gun Board. Time after time, the members ask the same thing: "Why do you want to use a concealed weapon?" Then, to find out how the weapon might be used: "Where does your work take you? What are your hours? If you want to use the gun at work, do you have a letter from your boss approving the use?" An applicant claiming to need the gun for protection is asked, "Have you been threatened?"

Just wanting to have your pistol on your hip as you drive into Detroit gets you nowhere with the Gun Board.

The questions have right and wrong answers. According to Steve Hiller, the most commonly given reason deemed unacceptable is "a generalized apprehension about a lawless society." Just wanting to have your pistol on your hip as you drive into Detroit gets you nowhere with the Gun Board.

The right answers are no secret. Some are plainly stated on the application form, such as this line printed in all capitals: "If request is in connection with carrying sums of money, applicant must submit evidence of need; therefore, these items should be presented to the Gun Board at the time of the applicant's interview." Thurkow is one of four people this day who will use that argument ("It takes three hundred dollars just to fill that puppy up," he says, speaking of his truck). Only one of the four, however, has brought along the requested bank cash deposit receipts or daily cash accounting books to convince the board. She receives her permit. Thurkow and the two others are tabled until next month.

All the other applicants get a permit, except for one man with a drunken driving conviction who's appealing a previous rejection. They now face only one more

hoop before they can pick up their permit to carry a concealed weapon: they must show they have passed an NRA-approved concealed-weapons course or received equivalent training.

Who carries a concealed weapon in Washtenaw County? Those approved at today's meeting include a well-dressed anesthesiologist who is a crime target because he carries narcotics to fill pumps for patients with chronic pain; a man who drives to shooting competitions with numerous rifles and a hefty supply of ammunition that might attract thieves; a senior citizen and gun collector who also frequently travels with guns; a hunter; and a fortyish woman who manages a restaurant and is especially wary for her safety because she was raped as a teen. All the permits are restricted: the holders can carry weapons only when they need to.

The board interview struck me as an organized information-gathering system, not a yes-or-no rubber stamp. The board could be persuaded. A lawyer with a Woody Allen physique expecting a violent reaction from a man he would be naming soon in a suit had a hard time proving his case to the board until his lawyer skills kicked into high gear. He argued that he met the criteria: "I have good reason to fear for my safety." He pleaded: "I have a wife and two kids and don't want to leave them alone." He debated the law: "I don't think the test should be that I've had a specific threat. I think the test should be a reasonable fear." Steve Hiller had met his match. He looked back down at the application, reviewed the background information, and eventually approved the concealed-weapons permit with the restriction that it would be valid only while the man remained a member of the Michigan Bar.

Agun enthusiast

After the meeting I visit Todd Thurkow at home to find out a bit more about his unabashed, unapologetic enthusiasm for guns. A friendly retriever is tied up outside his small ranch house on a city street close to the Chelsea Fairgrounds. A red pickup and two tarp-covered cars are parked in the driveway. His rig is down the street. He used to keep it on his front lawn, insisting he could park it there legally because his yard was church property. The Chelsea authorities replied that he needed a special-use permit even if he had registered his place as the Libertarian Church of St. Gambrinus. (St. Gambrinus is the patron saint for fermented beverages.)

Thurkow's dark living room has two old couches, Rolling Stones posters, a Harley-Davidson sign, guitars, CDs, and a stereo. "Would you like a Coke?" he asks politely. Fresh air blows in through the screen door as I sip and Todd smokes cigarette after cigarette with blackened fingers.

Thurkow grew up with guns. His dad gave him a BB gun when he was six years old and his first "real gun" when he was eleven. When other kids were studying or playing sports, he was hunting. He even took his rifle to school—legally, locked in his truck—as he sandwiched in classes at Chelsea High School between early morning and late afternoon rabbit-hunting ses-

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sions. "I'd gut them and leave the meat sitting in the cooler in the truck. I remember the parking lot monitor would ask me every morning, 'Did you get anything this morning?'"

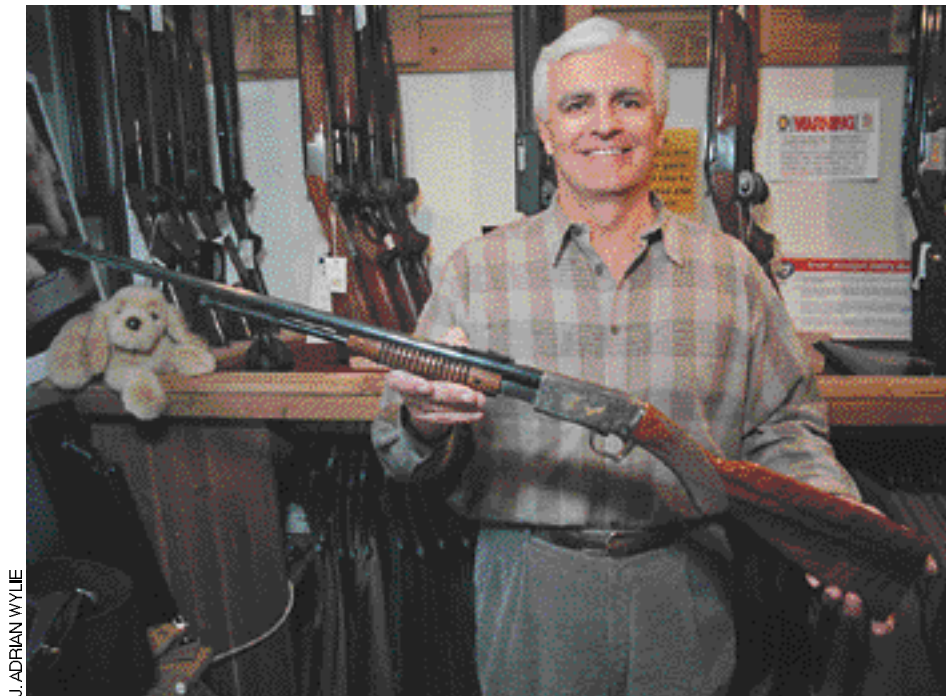
Last year, a neighbor took advantage of Thurkow's high-profile gun ownership: he and a friend broke into Thurkow's home and stole two handguns. Both men were caught, but only one was charged and convicted. Ironically, he was given a sentence of six months at Camp Waterloo, just outside Chelsea. Thurkow later saw him working across the street with other boot camp inmates, cleaning the fairgrounds.

Thurkow's enthusiasm remains steadfast since the robbery—besides working as a trucker and managing a local rock band, the High Rollers, he is also an independent contractor recruiting for the NRA (he gets a commission for every person he signs up, which helps pay his own dues). He has made changes, though. He's purchased a huge safe that he proudly shows me, neatly lined with handguns on the doors, rifles and shotguns standing up, and stacked rows of ammunition. He says it's to "protect his investment." He worries that someone could get killed with his stolen handgun, including himself. He mentioned the fact as part of his argument for carrying a concealed weapon. At the next Gun Board meeting, he'll bring in proof of his need to carry cash, and his permit will be approved.

The concealed-weapons tug of war

Todd Thurkow looks forward to the day when getting a concealed-weapons permit will be as easy as getting a driver's license. But that day hasn't yet come. This year, state legislation was pending for strict Michigan to loosen up and join the twenty-eight other "shall issue" states. That would mean that practically all non-felons would be allowed to carry concealed handguns. By June of this year, however, Governor Engler decided not to fight the anti-gun feelings stirred up by the Columbine massacre. He refused to consider the controversial bills before the legislature took its summer break.

Though the state law didn't pass, there are counties in Michigan where getting a concealed-weapons permit is easy. The rub is that you have to live in them. Macomb County, home of state senator Dave Jaye, who introduced the quashed "shall issue" legislation, is the least restrictive in its concealed-weapons rules. In late 1995, Macomb County prosecutor Carl Marlinga changed the system so that the county now bears the burden of showing why an applicant should be denied a permit; the county may no longer demand that the applicant demonstrate a specific need to carry a concealed weapon. According to an article in the *Detroit News* last year, the number of people who obtained permits in Macomb County more than tripled after the change, from 1,306 in 1995 to 4,174 in 1997. Meanwhile, the major-crime rate



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Collectible: MacGregor's owner Mac Richardson with the \$3,700 "trombone."

in Macomb County dropped by 28 percent between 1996 and 1998, the largest reduction of any county in Michigan (statewide, major crimes fell 7 percent in the same period).

The NRA and gun lovers like Jim Trevor say that the more concealed weapons there are on the streets, the better off we all are. "It's been proven that when more people have concealed weapons, criminals know that the victim may fight back. They're less likely to go through with the crime if they feel like their life is in jeopardy," says Trevor, citing the book *More Guns, Less Crime*, by University of

don't buy their guns at the most upscale gun store in town, MacGregor's Outdoors, in a restored house on North Main. The salesman, Jim (he wouldn't give his last name), describes his clientele as "the gentleman sportsman"—we get a ton of people from the university, professionals, doctors, dentists, high-stress individuals who need an outlet." Jim is quick to say that guns are a small part of the store's business—he'd rather show off a featherlight Orvis fly-fishing rod than talk about guns—but "they're pretty, and they draw people in." Pretty and expensive: the cheapest rifle or shotgun MacGregor's

"It's been proven that when more people have concealed weapons, criminals know that the victim may fight back. They're less likely to go through with the crime if they feel like their life is in jeopardy."

Chicago professor John R. Lott Jr.

This research is hotly debated on the Internet. The NRA defends the book at www.nra.org. Meanwhile, Handgun Control, the lobby that pushed the Brady Bill through, attacks Lott's research at its site, handguncontrol.org. In rebuttal, Handgun Control cites a 1995 study by David McDowell of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Susan Morrel-Samuels, from the U-M School of Public Health, looks at the issue from the public health perspective. "The question that public health experts ask," she says, "is how can we protect the public from firearm injuries?" Morrel-Samuels says that declines in crime have occurred in all states, not just jurisdictions that make it easier to carry a concealed weapon. She attributes these drops to "changes in demographics, changes in drug trafficking patterns, more effective policing policies, and the strong economy."

MacGregor's cuts its niche

Guys like Todd Thurkow probably

sells is \$700, and many are in the \$1,000–\$3,000 range.

Don, a sixty-five-year-old customer, drove from Brighton to look for a rifle for his adult son. Grey-haired and balding, he wears a knit shirt with a small "polo" crest over his heart, cuffed cotton pants, brown leather penny loafers with antique buffalo-head nickels instead of pennies, a silver bracelet, and a heavy gold gemstone ring. He asks Jim to show him a "trombone."

The salesman leads him to a table where a meticulously crafted gun lies majestically in a case lined with fake fur (all of MacGregor's other guns stand in wooden racks against the wall). The price tag says \$3,700. "That's a beauty," says Don, impressed. "Trombones," Jim explains, are Belgian-made Browning pump-action twenty-twos, so rare that they're bought as investments.

The trombone is beautiful enough to blow its own horn. Between the trigger and barrel, a scene is engraved on a piece of stainless steel the size of a business card: a hunting dog chasing pheasants in

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PHOTOS COURTESY MICHIGAN DAILY

Natasha Qureshi obeyed all the rules when she bought a gun in March. Three days later, she killed her ex-boyfriend and herself at his Kingsley St. apartment.

the air, with the dog and pheasants embossed in gold leaf. Roy Rogers himself might have been proud to wear that engraving on a belt buckle. “Look at the high polish on the walnut stock and checking [embedded crisscross lines] on the barrel, how the wood meets the metal, the bluing on the metal of the barrel,” Don says. “The guns in Dunham’s have stocks made out of beech wood or crating lumber.

“If I had that gun,” he adds, “I may not even fire it. Of the two hundred guns I’ve owned, I haven’t fired more than twenty.” Though he, too, doesn’t want to give his last name, he’s happy to talk about his guns, and he tells me that he’s never broken a law in his life. “They don’t write articles about us, because we don’t go in and shoot churches up,” he says.

Such tragedies, he says, reflect a change in morality. “We never thought of taking something [a gun] to school, never. That would be like stabbing your parent in the heart. When we had a fight, we went out and duked it out.”

The firearms in MacGregor’s are almost all shotguns, used by people who shoot at moving targets (sporting clays, trap, and skeet) and hunt birds, including doves, pheasants, and ducks. The trombone is the exception, a “plinker,” so called because the small bullets it fires aren’t good for much more than shooting at tin cans to hear the “plink” sound. The fancy walnut and the metal inlays on many of the guns wouldn’t hold up well in bad weather, so they might not be a deer hunter’s first choice.

After Don leaves, Jim says that he was a typical customer in some ways—“Ninety percent are middle-aged white guys like me”—but not typical in his strong political views. (Don kept trying to steer the conversation to his love for the NRA and hatred of Clinton.) “On Saturday morning customers come in, hang out, drink coffee, and swap fishing and hunting stories.” A golf tournament on a TV in an armoire draws standing viewers. “We have every-

thing here but a potbellied stove,” Jim says. He never worries that a rifle or shotgun he sells might be used against a person. “Absolutely not,” he says. “We sell to a very high-class, talented customer.”

Natasha buys a gun

MacGregor’s, like Dunham’s, doesn’t sell handguns. In fact, just about the only place you can get a “real” handgun in Ann Arbor is Investment Rarities—which is probably why Natasha Qureshi went there

“She had all these questions—where do I go to practice, where can I go to shoot. She seemed like a real nice girl.” He sold her the nine-millimeter Beretta semiautomatic she selected.

this past March to buy a pistol.

As the law requires, Qureshi first applied for a permit in Dave Gray’s office in the basement of City Hall. Gray did a NICS search, which confirmed that the twenty-one-year-old U-M senior had no criminal record. Gray gave her the booklet of handgun rules and administered the state test; like everyone else, she passed it. She raised her hand, swore that the information provided on her application was true, and got her permit.

Qureshi drove to Investment Rarities and handed the small green form to Pete Linden. The form told him she had already been cleared by the NICS database and Dave Gray. Linden, like Gray, found her unremarkable. As Linden recalls, “She had all these questions—where do I go to practice, where can I go to shoot. She seemed like a real nice girl.” He sold her the nine-millimeter Beretta semiautomatic she selected.

After purchasing the gun, Qureshi was required by law to return to Dave Gray’s office within ten days to register its serial number. She never did—but the Beretta

found its way back to the Ann Arbor police just the same.

Three days after Qureshi bought the gun, she and her ex-boyfriend, Christopher Groesbeck, twenty-two, a recent U-M graduate, were found dead on East Kingsley. A police investigation determined that Qureshi had confronted Groesbeck in his apartment, slit her wrists, shot and killed him, and finally shot and killed herself.

Qureshi was obviously a deeply troubled woman—but to Groesbeck’s tragic misfortune, she was also a master at hiding her feelings. It wasn’t just Dave Gray and Pete Linden she fooled. According to the *Ann Arbor News*, a neighbor accompanied Qureshi on a weekend trip to Toronto only days before the killings but had no clue of any problem.

The cost of Qureshi’s deception was high. Groesbeck’s roommate, Jacques Kobersy, told the *Michigan Daily* that when Qureshi murdered Groesbeck, “she took life that bubbled from his eyes, his smile, and his actions. She took from him the friends and family who loved him, and that is something we will never recover from.”

Do we need stricter gun controls because a deceptively “together” person like Natasha Qureshi can commit a terrible murder with no warning? Jim Tieman of the Ann Arbor police doesn’t think so. “There’s no perfect solution to prevent it,” he argues. “People who want to maim people will.”

Dave Gray “took it personally” that he had failed to detect Qureshi’s true state of mind, says a colleague, police staff

sergeant Richard Kinsey. But in retrospect, Gray doesn’t see how he could have done things any differently. “The state sets up certain guidelines, and they [the applicants] have to swear to me that they don’t have certain problems,” he says. “If I feel satisfied that they are okay, what else can you do?”

And that appears to be the bottom line: although the Brady Bill has reduced the number of felons buying guns legally, some apparently manage to obtain them nonetheless. And the law can do nothing at all about those who, like Natasha Qureshi, successfully conceal their deadly intent.

While the gun Elkhoja is accused of using remains unaccounted for, Qureshi’s Beretta, at least, will do no further harm. After being sent to the Michigan State Police crime lab in Lansing for analysis, it was returned to the Ann Arbor police. As soon as the last paperwork is completed, it will be shipped to a smelter near Muskegon. There it will be destroyed—melted down to make counterweights for construction equipment. ■