



From the Desk of Representative
Tracy Cramer

Liberal, female and minority: America's new gun owners aren't who you'd think

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CNN —

Several times a week you can hear gunfire echoing from Brandi Joseph's scenic Southern California property. A licensed firearms instructor and dealer, Joseph decided to open Fortune Firearms in December to serve a growing and rapidly changing clientele.

"There is a huge uptick in female owners," Joseph said. "Women are getting trained; women are carrying... liberal and conservative."



Proof of that change pulled up Joseph's long, dusty driveway in the San Jacinto Valley just before 10 a.m. for a Saturday social, of sorts. A group of seven African American women stepped out of their cars seemingly eager to start their first firearms training session.

Gun sales rise among Black people as they look for firearm training and

"Our society and climate is changing... it's just better to be prepared for your own safety and protection. That's how we feel," Laronya Day, who organized the outing, said.

Now in their early 50s, the women have been friends since they were kids in Los Angeles, about two and a half hours from Joseph's business. And most of them acknowledge they lean left politically.

“Do you have some friends who would be totally turned off by this?” we asked Charlean Ward. “Absolutely,” she responded. “That’s their choice; I’m exercising my choice.”

Jamie Beverly looked less certain, if not uneasy. “Seeing all the guns on the table, I was like ‘ugh,’” Beverly said. “Would you ever want to carry?” we asked her. “I don’t think so,” she whispered.



*At the firing range at Fortune Firearms, in Hemet, California.
Jason Kravarik/CNN*

Over the course of nearly two hours, Joseph led a detailed instruction, teaching the women about everything from the types of handguns best suited for self-defense to how to load and disarm a firearm. Only after the women had repeatedly loaded the cartridge, inserted the magazine, chambered the gun, and then doing it all in reverse, did Joseph determine they were ready to fire at their paper targets.

Echoes of gunfire rippled through the rural valley as the women pulled their triggers.

‘I definitely am more closeted being a gun owner’

About an hour east of Los Angeles, Yessica Mendez and her wife Crisia Regalado met with their instructor Tom Nguyen at Burro Canyon Shooting Park. But Regalado, 25, admits she at first wanted nothing to do with guns.

“Just the sounds... the vibrations of each impact... made me very jittery and shaky and I had to excuse myself out of the range,” Regalado recalled. “I don’t know, it just triggered something inside of me and it made me scared.”

Mendez, 30, was equally disinterested in guns at first. But in recent years she’s felt a growing need for self-protection.

“I’m a Mexican woman in a same-sex relationship; I need to feel safe. I need to feel protected,” Mendez said. “And right now the laws and the things that are going on don’t make me feel safe and don’t make me feel protected.”



*Crisia Regalado and Yessica Mendez.
Jason Kravarik/CNN*

She convinced her wife to join her for a training session with Nguyen, who began LA Progressive Shooters in 2020.

“I never intended to become an instructor, but the need from the community was there,” Nguyen said. “And there’s also folks from my own liberal community who see me as, ‘oh you like guns you must be a gun nut.’ But that’s not really it at all.”

Nguyen says his clients are mostly liberal and from all backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations. He prides himself on creating an inclusive student base.

“The more I educate those who are formally anti-gun the more they actually realize that there’s more nuance to it,” he said.

Both Mendez and Regalado now have their own guns and are working toward getting their concealed carry permits. But they avoid talking about their guns with friends, who they say are firmly anti-gun.

"They're really not open to understanding," Mendez said. Adding that she feels more comfortable discussing her same-sex relationship with friends than her guns. "I definitely am more closeted being a gun owner, for fear of retaliation."

Finding common ground at the range

Both Mendez and Regalado at first worried about the type of people they encounter at the gun range, many of whom, they say, advertise their conservative politics in what they're wearing or listening to.

"It's mostly all men, mostly all white men, older men like 70s, 80s," Mendez said. "Seeing people looking at us, and kind of just staring... It always makes us more uncomfortable. Because we're like, 'oh my God are they going to come and tell us, like, get out of here... you don't belong here.'"

Instead, they've gotten a different reaction.

"They're like, 'Hey, you're doing well, but can I show you something that might help you more?,' Mendez said.

Mendez says not only has it changed her impression of those individuals, but she also believes it's given some a different perception of people like her.

"When I (came) back the next day, (one of the men) was like, 'Hey! I saw your wife out there – she looks nice. Tell her I said 'hi'."

Still, as a Mexican-American immigrant in a same-sex marriage Mendez feels pulled in different directions politically.

"But at the end of the day I have to choose. Am I going to choose guns? Or am I going to choose my relationship? And I will always choose my relationship, but it's just like a shame that we can't come together and feel safe," she said.

De-stigmatizing lawful gun ownership

Gun sales in one of the country's few black-owned gun shops, Redstone Firearms in Burbank, California, soared post-pandemic and have remained steady, according to co-owner Jonathan Solomon.

"It's not just one demographic. It's not just one ethnic group. There's just not one level of income... it's a wide variety of folks that come in here now," he said.

While white men have the highest rates of gun ownership in the US, one survey shows that in the first half of 2021 roughly 90% of retailers saw a surge in gun

sales to African Americans. The same survey found that about 80% of retailers reported an increase in firearm purchases by Hispanic and Asian Americans.

Solomon, a former police officer, opened the shop about nine years ago with his wife Geneva. He says his new, diverse customers are primarily buying their first gun for a shared reason: self-protection. But he warns them to pay close attention to the rapidly changing regulations on firearms.

"It's a consistent education when it comes to gun laws, especially in California," Solomon said.

California is consistently rated among the states with the toughest gun laws. There are strict policies aimed at dissuading hasty gun purchases, including a 10-day cooling off period from when you buy a gun to when you can take it out of the store. And getting a concealed carry permit in places like Los Angeles can take more than a year and include background checks and interviews.

"It's really convenient to think that if we just ban an object, if we just ban guns, then all of our problems would be solved – all of society's problems would be solved – but that's not true," said firearms instructor Nguyen.

Nguyen said more and more residents are willing to put in the time and go through the hurdles to legally buy and carry a gun. And he says most of his clients support tough gun regulation so long as there's clarity, consistency and still a path toward legal gun ownership. He only hopes they incorporate education and training into that process.

"I want to de-stigmatize lawful and responsible gun ownership," Nguyen said.

'I just feel liberated'

After completing their two-hour class at Fortune Firearms, most of the group of seven childhood friends were noticeably more comfortable in their new-found knowledge.

"I just feel liberated," Ward said. "I feel like, let's move to the next step: license to carry, get the concealed weapon."

Data from Harvard found that more than half of new gun owners are likely to be women. Joseph says many of her clients are more liberal women who don't advertise that they're carrying.

"Most people have (in mind) the cookie-cutter firearm owner... right-wing.... But then there's the other side that is quiet. They own guns. They're buying them. They're stockpiling ammo. It's just not on their Facebook pages and it's not their profile pictures," she said.



*This group of friends took instruction on using firearms at Fortune Firearms.
Jason Kravarik/CNN*

Day is now planning to move forward with carrying after Joseph's class. "With all the things that you see on the news, things are happening more... in so many public areas, movie theaters, Walmarts, grocery stores.... It's like there's no limit now," she said.

But gun ownership is not for everyone. Even after their course, within the close-knit group of friends there are differing opinions toward firearms.

"I think it's great that more people are being educated and taking steps to protect themselves and protect their families," Beverly said. "But for me personally, I'm still leery. I don't think I would purchase (a gun)."