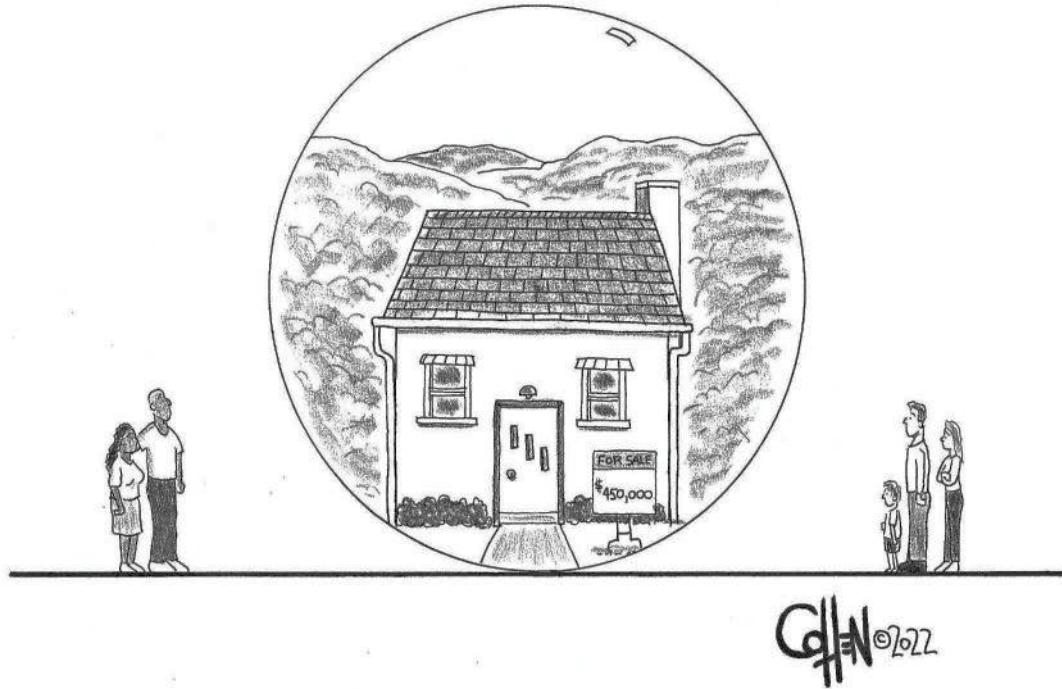


# OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

## ON THE OUTSIDE, LOOKING IN



DAVID COHEN/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

## I protect my students every day. Where are you, politicians?



**Larry Strauss**  
USA Today  
Guest columnist

I remember where I was when I heard about the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut.

I was in the nurse's office, at the school where I teach, stuffing instant ice packs into my first-aid kit. The players on the boys basketball team I was coaching were banged up a lot and we went through three or four of those things each game. Tyrone and Justin, starting center and small forward, sat behind me, wrapping their knees.

The nurse mumbled the horrifying news as she read it off her computer. I moved toward her desk, needing to see the words for myself, but before I got there, an explosion of shattering glass startled us all.

### Students rushed toward an intruder

I ran into the hallway, as a man came headfirst through a glass door, his face and neck bleeding. Justin and Tyrone got to him before I did. They pushed him back outside while I yelled at them to get away from the intruder, who was yelling incoherently. I told them, "I got this." Then the man ran off and we didn't see him again. The nurse called the police.

I admonished Justin and Tyrone for their heroics. What if that guy had a gun? They both shrugged. Justin said, "Then we'd all been shot."

Justin is a college graduate now and a paralegal. A few years ago, he came within a few votes of winning a seat on the Compton (California) City Council. Tyrone just earned his master's in sociology with an eye on his doctorate.

Notwithstanding their bravery that awful day – and the fact that they had both grown up in a community besieged by violence – I've often been haunted by what-ifs. Not just from that day but countless times. Altercations that could have turned disastrous. Mental illness, anger, jealousy, stupidity, all the things that can pull triggers on us.

The politicians and gun-regulation opponents who blame mass school shootings and the slaughter of children on our collective failure to adequately deal with mental illness are not wrong.

Anyone who walks into a school intending to murder children has surely been afflicted with a mental defect we ought never allow to go unchecked and untreated. And allowing someone that disturbed to obtain high-powered firearms is a collective madness, also yet untreated.

When I learned of last week's atrocity in Uvalde, Texas, I was on a school bus with about 40 high school seniors on a field trip. As we read the awful news on our phones, quiet pervaded, then kids wanted to talk about it. What could be done? There has to be something! Why didn't I have a solution? Why have adults so poisoned their world?

I thought about the fact that my students are the peers of those poor children slaughtered at Sandy Hook. If we lived in a less violent culture, a place where mental illness weren't so neglected and where guns and ammunition weren't quite so easy for the depraved and the homicidal to acquire, then any of my students might have found themselves attending college next year with one of those kids from Sandy Hook.

We live in a country inhabited by the ghosts of the children and teachers slaughtered at school – and ev-

**I hear people make claims about the existence of evil in the human heart as an explanation for what happened at Sandy Hook and Uvalde. But aren't they really talking about the depraved indifference to the safety of others, and isn't it everywhere?**

everyone else who has been deprived of their inalienable right to life by a mass shooter.

What if the guy who had burst into our school yelling incoherently had walked to a gun store first, screaming at phantoms? Could that man who dove through a glass door have bought a firearm?

### Violence is common in my community

Guns, legal and otherwise, are common in the community where I have taught high school for three decades. Police have routinely briefed us about which gangs were at war with each other and how to identify which students might be affiliated with one of the gangs.

There have been killings on the street right outside our school and lockdowns that lasted long enough to require students to urinate in trash cans.

A depressing number of my students over the years have been traumatized by witnessing people shot to death, including those who witnessed their fifth-grade teacher hit in the head by a stray bullet that came through a window.

Who would be so heartless as to have a shootout next to an elementary school and put students and teachers in danger for a conflict over money or territory or pride?

I hear people make claims about the existence of evil in the human heart as an explanation for what happened at Sandy Hook and Uvalde. But aren't they really talking about the depraved indifference to the safety of others, and isn't it everywhere?

It's in the U.S. Senate because they feel no obligation for the lives of children and their teachers. I wish they would be honest. Tell us it's up to us to play human shield because the Second Amendment says so. Tell us school shootings are our responsibility because we don't lock all the exits or run metal detectors over enough of our students. Tell us it's because we don't do enough to help students struggling with mental illness.

Of course, we should do more to help our students. The causes of this mental health crisis are vast and complex. Poverty, fractured families, the cruelties of social media, cycles of violence – street violence and domestic violence and school violence, and the specter of another school shooting, and just the simple terror of living in such a heavily armed society.

I'm willing. I think all serious educators are. But why is it all on us?

How about politicians and gun rights advocates meet us halfway? Do something to make it less likely we will be gunned down in our classrooms.

*Larry Strauss has been a high school English teacher in South Los Angeles since 1992. He is a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors and the author of more than a dozen books, including "Students First and Other Lies: Straight Talk From a Veteran Teacher" and his new novel, "Light Man." Follow him on Twitter: @LarryStrauss.*



**Eric Hartley**  
Palm Springs Desert Sun  
Opinion editor

## Ezekiel Bonillas joins Desert Sun Editorial Board

Our Editorial Board, which decides the positions expressed in Desert Sun editorials, has a new member.

Ezekiel Bonillas of Indio is our latest community member. That means he is not a Desert Sun employee but a valley resident who brings his own life and work experience to the board's discussions.

He's now one of five community members, joining Gloria Franz, Terria Smith, Rob Moon and Laura James. The other two board members are myself and Executive Editor Julie Makinen.

A valley native, Bonillas just completed a doctoral program at Case Western Reserve University and teaches entrepreneurship, management and business strategy as a professor at Cal State San Bernardino. He's married with two sons.

When speaking with the board before we invited him to join, he told us he caught the entrepreneurship bug early: A job washing windows at 16 turned into a weekend business that eventually had 30 employees.

After getting his undergraduate education at CSUSB, Bonillas worked as a bank loan officer and as a business advisor, then for the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership. He later headed economic development efforts for the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians.

He started teaching at CSUSB part time in 2014, was named outstanding lecturer in 2021 and now joins the full-time faculty in the School of Entrepreneurship.

Bonillas offers the board a valuable perspective, having learned about economic development from a variety of angles, including by starting a business himself and advising entrepreneurs in the United States, Mexico and France.

Among other things, he told us interested in sharing the experience of Latino entrepreneurs, since he knows some of the barriers they face.

Already, Bonillas has jumped into the board's weekly meetings, offering thoughtful takes on the variety of issues we discuss before deciding what to focus on and what to say.

We're glad to have him aboard.

*Eric Hartley is The Desert Sun's opinion editor. Email him at [eric.hartley@desertsun.com](mailto:eric.hartley@desertsun.com)*



**Ezekiel Bonillas** CAL STATE SAN BERNARDINO

## SHARE YOUR VIEWS

The Desert Sun welcomes guest columns or cartoons addressing local political and social issues, or some other aspect of life in the Coachella Valley. General guidelines include:

- Columns should be 500 to 550 words.
  - Cartoons can be one panel or multiple.
  - We print the author's photo, city of residence and contact info (typically an email address) with a column; and name and city of residence with a cartoon.
  - Anonymous columns or cartoons are never published.
  - Stick to a single topic in columns and avoid personal attacks.
  - We reserve the right to edit columns and to republish (including electronically) all columns and cartoons.
- Direct submissions and questions to [letters@desertsun.com](mailto:letters@desertsun.com).

## SEND YOUR LETTER

Email letters to [letters@desertsun.com](mailto:letters@desertsun.com)

- Letters must include the writer's name, address and telephone number for verification
  - Letters should be fewer than 200 words
  - Letters may be edited for length, clarity and taste
- See a complete list of rules online.