IN GUNS
THEY TRUST
Guns are a loaded topic in most black households due to their role in violent crimes that are causing communities of color to crumble across the country. As more Americans are coming to terms with a need for extra protection in perilous times, studies show black people are pulling the trigger on gun ownership. Some are previous victims of violence. Others want to stand their ground if and when violence comes knocking. All of them want to feel safe. But when it comes to safety and self-defense, an underlying question always looms large:

**Can we really fight fire with fire?**

By Emell Derra Adolphus • Photos by Lauren Jezierski

On a Saturday morning, less than a month till Christmas and the temperature close to freezing, eight strangers shuffled into the Firearm Exchange Gun Range in Livonia for some last-minute shopping. Rick Ector, a well-known firearm instructor and Second Amendment rights advocate in metro Detroit, checked off names as the group settled into a makeshift conference room separate from the building’s main retail and shooting spaces. They were there to take Ector’s concealed pistol license (CPL) class – a $150 course, lasting eight hours, where participants learn firearm fundamentals such as ethical and legal liabilities and your basic point-and-shoot techniques.

Upon successfully completing the coursework, they will join the estimated 16.3 million Americans who can legally carry a concealed pistol.

Compared to other CPL classes at the range, Ector’s is noticeably small. He keeps a cap on his groups so he can adequately give one-on-one instruction to each of his students. Calmly pacing at the front of the room, in gray reptile-skin cowboy boots, jeans and his favorite “Black Guns Matter” hoodie (more on that later), Ector gauges the group’s general gun knowledge. There are no dumb questions.

“I am here to push you in the positive pro-gun direction,” Ector says in a slow, methodical manner. “I am not here to make people own a gun. I am here to educate people about their right to own a gun.”

Americans wanting guns is far from news. In fact, it’s one of the inalienable rights guaranteed to all Americans by the Second Amendment. It’s also been no secret that most gun owners in America are overwhelmingly white males. But recent findings show a change of tide and color is on the horizon. Since the start of the 2016 presidential race, the National African-American Gun Association (NAAGA) reported a record swell of 20,000 members – a perceived cultural shift, or shudder, as people of color take up arms in an increasingly racially tense political climate. Beyond politics, the path to purchasing a firearm for many black folks is often deeply personal. Ector and other black Second Amendment rights advocates are part of a growing movement to turn that path into power.

First lesson: YOU DO NOT NEED A CPL TO OWN A GUN.

A concealed pistol license enables you to carry a firearm on your person in a concealed manner (under shirt, strapped to your ankle or leg) in public, unless it is a gun-free zone. Without a CPL, you must open carry (gun on hip in holster, John Wayne style) and legally won’t be allowed to enter banks, sports arenas, theaters, churches and liquor stores, among other areas. Michigan law requires you to be at least 21 years old to purchase a firearm and pass a background check, which usually takes a couple minutes. All handguns must be registered through the state. But shotguns and rifles, most commonly used for home protection, don’t require state registration.

According to Ector, there are two types of gun owners: those who purchase a firearm before something happens and those who purchase a firearm after something happens. Ector regretfully admits that he falls into the latter category.

“You know what this is, give me your
money,” Ector remembers two teenaged boys telling him, one pointing a handgun. They were waiting for him in the backyard of his Detroit home in Rosedale Park when he came out the garage. This happened around 2006.

“l am lucky to be alive,” Ector says. After his robbers unsuccessfully tried to take him into his home, Ector got them to take the money in his pockets and leave. But each year, others aren’t so lucky. For this reason, Ector created a special shoot-and-show event for women that he hosts every year the Sunday after Mother’s Day. Last year, 600 women came out to learn how to shoot. This year, it was closer to 800.

“We trained more than 700 women how to shoot a gun in one day. It was a smashing success,” says Ector. The event focuses on removing the fear around firearms so participants can make a conscientious decision about whether gun ownership is the right solution for their self-defense.

“If for whatever reason you find this is something you cannot do – you have ideological issues or you decided that you couldn’t do this to another person, even if that person was trying to kill you, rob you or rape you – this will tell you that you need to find another solution rather than holding out hope that carrying a gun will be your solution.”

Owning a firearm became a self-defense solution for Tanisha Moner, but it was “a process” she says.

“Rick was just really super patient. He gave very clear concise instruction,” says Moner, who met Ector years ago at the recommendation of a friend. Now she is a certified firearm instructor and doesn’t leave home without her Glock 19 pistol.

“I don’t walk out of my house without shoes on. I don’t walk out without my gun on my hip,” she says.

Moner grew up in a military family and was never curious about guns because her father “removed the curiosity from them.”

“Yes, there is a shotgun under the couch. Don’t touch it; it’s not a toy,” Moner remembers. Her attitude towards firearms changed at 17 when she was robbed and sexually assaulted at gunpoint. “And I didn’t have so much as a fingernail file to defend myself with,” she says. Ector helped her face her fears, and now she is helping other women like her face theirs, too.

“The hardest thing is pulling the trigger the very first time. After that, I’m not saying it’s easy. I am saying it gets easier,” says Moner. “Typically, when we see a woman who is an instructor, she is typically someone of another race. You don’t see everyday black women who do this. Our relationship with guns is that of fear. We aren’t empowered to learn more. We are sitting ducks.”

When, after the 2015 Paris bombings, Detroit Police Department chief James Craig quipped that terrorists would “think twice about coming to Detroit” because of the city’s proliferation of gun owners, he may have had a point.

In 2014, 1,169 handgun permits were issued in Detroit and more than 8,000 guns were registered with the DPD. Statewide, upwards of 115,000 gun permits were issued, according to the Michigan State Police, and more than 30,000 Detroit residents are legally armed. The number of blacks who prioritize gun rights over gun control rose from 18 percent in 1993 to 34 percent in 2014, according to the Pew Research Center. Last year, a Pew study also found 3 in 10 American adults said they owned a gun and another 11 percent did not personally own a gun but lived with someone who does.

Chief Craig doubled down on gun-centric solutions this year in supporting President Trump’s comments to arm teachers after a student shooter killed 17 people with a semi-automatic rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in February.

“This is about the business of mitigating a threat,” Craig said in an interview with Fox 2 Detroit. As of this writing, a CNN report published in May found there have been 22 school shootings so far this year.

Even teeming with gun owners, Detroit continues to make the top-five list as one of the most violent cities in America. The problem is a lack of conflict resolution, says Maj Toure of the Philadelphia-based gun rights group Black Guns Matter. This summer, Toure will spend a month in Chicago to focus on helping communities ravaged by violence heal through de-escalation trainings and education on their Second Amendment rights for protection.

“When you talk about Chicago or any part of America for a talking point and you’re not applying a solution to it, that’s counter-productive,” says Toure, who spoke at the National Rifle Association’s annual meeting in Dallas this year. Ector was also there. “If gun control works, there would not be mass shootings in schools. Ask yourself this: Why is there never a mass shooting in a police department? Because that person knows you
are going to get lit up. Period.

“The point I am trying to make is gun control takes away Americans’ freedom to defend themselves while making them soft targets. We’re trying to attack civil liberties and freedoms in the name of safety.”

**SECOND LESSON: GUN OWNERSHIP IS A BIPARTISAN RIGHT.**

Most Second Amendment rights advocates are portrayed as far-right gun-toting republicans. But reality is a little more complex. According to a 2017 Pew survey, there are also significant differences across parties that found republican and republican-leaning independents more than twice as likely as democrats to say they own a gun (44 percent vs. 20 percent). Among those who live in rural areas, 46 percent say they are gun owners, compared with 28 percent of those who live in the suburbs and 19 percent in urban areas.

“The Second Amendment and guns were important to white males during the early years of the country because the perceived threats to security came from enslaved Africans and the First Nations (Indians),” explains racial justice attorney Mark Fancher with ACLU of Michigan, citing historian John Hope Franklin’s book, Runaway Slaves. “For their part, black people have had a more practical relationship with guns. In the South, members of black rural communities armed themselves for defense against real – not imagined – attacks by the Klan, nightriders and other terrorist groups.”

It is a little-known fact that Martin Luther King Jr. applied for a gun permit and was denied in Alabama after his house was firebombed in 1956, notes University of California, Los Angeles law professor Adam Winkler in his book Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America. Later in his career, MLK famously publicly and politically turned to favor unarmed, direct action as the way to real peace.

“There are many underlying social, political, economic and historical factors that are at the heart of the ‘race problem’ in America,” says Fancher. “Guns are at best an incidental manifestation of issues that are much deeper and more profound. For example, even if black people were heavily armed, are they going to be excused if they choose to use deadly force to defend themselves against police who choose to shoot civilians unlawfully?”

At a local level, Black Bottom Gun Club (BBGC) co-founder Chad King is determined to rehab the image of the black gun owner from being perceived as “a thug” through community service and engagement.

“If we keeping it 100, the stereotypes of a black gun owner are not flattering at all, especially if we go by what is depicted in the media,” he says. It’s those stereotypes that kept King from owning a gun. Then one summer evening, he and his wife came home to find their door kicked in and townhouse ransacked. They were out celebrating their fifth wedding anniversary.

“The door was kicked in so bad to where we couldn’t close the door. We couldn’t lock the door,” King remembers. In a matter of months, King had purchased a Mossburg 500 pump-action shotgun for his household and moved. He obtained his CPL last year after starting BBGC as a chapter of the National African-American Gun Association. Currently, they have 35 members.

“The genesis of Black Bottom Gun Club came about shortly after the verdict in the Philando Castile case. It wasn’t in response to police killings per se, but it was an opportunity, because there wasn’t a chapter up here. And it made sense to have one up here,” says King, explaining that the 2016 Castile case in Minnesota reflects that the notion of violence in the African-American community goes beyond having access to guns.

“I think violence in the African-American community is more so a product of failed public policy; policy that fails to adequately address systemic racism and disenfranchisement,” he says. “Any solutions to gun...”
Third lesson: Do not produce your firearm unless you fully intend to use it.

When you are ready to fire a gun, Ector teaches you to pull the trigger in one swift motion. None of that “squeeze the trigger” stuff you hear in the movies. On the other side of the gun range’s bulletproof glass, gun shots sound like door slams. Inside the room, the air smells like gun powder.

Ector was credentialed as an instructor by the NRA in 2005 and since then, he’s taught well over 1,000 courses. Gun laws can be like moving targets and often change from state to state, he says. So it is your responsibility to stay up-to-date on the changing laws in your state. A good rule of thumb in any state is to never produce your firearm unless you intend to use it.

“If you pull your gun, actually use your gun to defend yourself,” says Ector. “Presumably, if your life is on the line, if your family’s life is on the line, and you made the point to shoot, do exactly that.” If you shoot your gun for any reason in Michigan, you will be arrested and investigated, even if it was in self-defense. In that case, Ector recommends that you always be first to call the police and explain your innocence.

“If you pull out your gun, you’re pulling it with the mindset that you are about to shoot someone. You don’t pull it out with the mindset that ‘I am going to show it and display in a way that I am going to intimidate someone,’” says Ector. “A lot of people get that wrong.”

In recent months, a case involving Detroit environmental activist Swatu-Salama Ra has garnered attention for that exact reason. Ra says she was acting in self-defense when she pulled her gun on another woman during an altercation outside her mother’s home last summer. The woman left and was first to file a complaint with the police department; Ra filed about two hours later. After hearing their versions of the story, the police decided to pursue felony assault and felony firearm convictions against Ra. In Michigan, people convicted of felony firearm convictions must serve a mandatory two years. Ra has been in jail since her conviction and is now nearing the end of a high-risk pregnancy.

“The entire thing was unfair. Any mandatory conviction is unfair because she was acting in lawful self-defense with a lawfully possessed and lawfully carried firearm,” explains Desiree Ferguson, a veteran defender who recently retired from the State Appellate Defender’s office after 27 years. She adds, “which was not even loaded, by the way.”

Ferguson was recruited to lead a team of criminal defense appellate law specialists handling Ra’s appeal. Their hope is to get Ra released on bond until her baby is born pending her appeal. Many things had already gone wrong with the case, Ferguson says. She believes the jury was under duress because the trial went on longer than expected, and she also believes the jury would not have convicted her had they known the punishment. (In Michigan, jurors are not allowed to be told what the penalty is during a trial.) But mostly, because of the mandatory sentencing, the judge’s hands were tied even though Ra had no prior record — only that of being a model citizen and activist.

“The law failed her. The police failed her. And the sentencing law failed her. The entire system conspired to fail her,” says Ferguson, who has known Ra since she was a child and considers her “like a daughter.” “The standard in the law is to have an honest and reasonable belief that you’re facing imminent danger. That’s what justifies you producing your weapon. But that means that somebody has got to get inside your head and decide whether they believe you had an honest and reasonable fear. Right? So you’re at risk.”

Ferguson isn’t a gun owner and describes herself as being against any type of war or violence. Although she understands gun ownership, she warns that to put your fate in the hands of the system is to play Russian roulette with your freedom.

When 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Miami Gardens, Florida, under the state’s stand-your-ground law, Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges. Had Martin lived to testify and name Zimmerman as the aggressor, Ferguson doubts it would have made a difference.

“I don’t know because I don’t know that America would believe their version of events. I don’t know that America would believe Trayvon. You know? It seems like America believes Zimmerman,” she says. “We have all these instances; the stories are being told because people are capturing it on video. In Philando’s case, it was live! So their story is being told, but it doesn’t matter ... because black lives don’t matter. And it’s just glaringly obvious when you look at all these cases that we just talked about. We’ve been under siege in this country since the first boat landed. So if anybody needs the right to self-defense and to protect themselves, it’s us.”

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