

Opinion: Make the debate over guns worthy of our son

By Mark Barden and Jackie Barden

Wednesday's Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on gun violence is the latest in a series of events following the Dec. 14 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Our 7-year-old son, Daniel, 19 of his first-grade classmates and six educators were killed in the tragedy. We believe this hearing is an opportunity to rise above the hard-line rhetoric and intransigence that too often lead to inaction and hopelessness, and we hope that our leaders and our nation will start a new conversation with a chance of achieving real change.

Our Daniel was a constant source of laughter and joy. He was intelligent, articulate, incredibly affectionate, fair, thoughtful toward others and unfailingly polite. Daniel believed in holding doors open for strangers. He talked to the person sitting alone. He loved to help clean up a mess, and he made sure there was enough milk for everyone before adding it to his cereal.

His kindergarten teacher recently wrote to us: "He is the kind of student that should come wrapped in ribbon because he is a gift to his teachers. I can remember leaving notes for our substitute to 'ask Daniel' if she or he needed help with anything."

Motivated by Daniel's empathy and kindness, one of our relatives created a Facebook page, "What Would Daniel Do?," to inspire others to reach out as our youngest son did.

As lawmakers and others discuss what can be done to curb gun violence, we hope Americans will ask, What would Daniel do?

Daniel would listen and be respectful. Our country needs a new dialogue, one that doesn't follow the tired script of political squabbling. Any improvement to our laws, no matter how small or reasonable, should not be decried as the forward wave of an attempt to "ban guns" or "take away rights." Even those of us who have lost the most are suggesting no such thing.

Daniel would be honest. We know that there are no easy answers to these multifaceted issues. Anyone who suggests that a single law would "solve the problem" isn't telling the truth. But neither is anyone who says that changes in our laws can't make a difference.

Daniel wouldn't give up hope. We refuse to accept the status quo. Making our society safer will require sustained, comprehensive action by individuals as well as by communities and government. As parents, there is nothing more important to us than our relationship with our children. Every parent can start right there, in their own home. On a broader level, it is urgent that we address the gaps in our mental health system and examine school security. We must have the same open dialogue about gun responsibility and accountability. The parental desire to love and protect our children is common ground for gun owners and non-gun owners alike.

We have joined with other families, neighbors and friends in making the Sandy Hook Promise (www.sandyhookpromise.org). We hope every member of Congress and Americans nationwide will join us in pledging to honor the lives lost last month by coming together to end these violent tragedies.

Our Daniel wanted to be a fireman like his uncles. He played drums in our family band, and he could run like the wind. Until Dec. 14, Daniel's future was limited only by the size of his dreams.

Our son's future was stolen from him: There will be no

firehouse, no more rock band, no Boston Marathon.

But if our nation uses this moment to make the future brighter for other children, Daniel's life and the lives of his classmates and educators will have meaning for years to come.

Our nation's ability to deal with gun violence is limited only by the civility of our discourse, the scope of our ambitions and – as Daniel would have done – our willingness to come together and take action.

Mark Barden is a musician and Jackie Barden is a teacher. They live in Newtown, Conn. This column first appeared in the Washington Post.