

Girls WITH GUNS

Across America, firearms are fast becoming a must-have accessory. But is this fear of serious crime justified or a sign of a society in the grip of intense paranoia?

Story by *Andreina Cordani*
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IT'S 2PM ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON at a downtown branch of Starbucks in Virginia. A queue of women snakes around the counter. They order skinny lattes and cakes, chat idly about their plans for the weekend and swap stories about how their kids are getting on at school. It's the sort of scene you'd expect to see at any Starbucks in the UK. Except for one glaring difference. Every one of these women is carrying a firearm.

Once you spot one, they all snap into focus, contained in pretty gun holsters strapped to their belts, hips or shoulders. There are various models – Glocks, Berettas and Walther PPKs. And many of the women here are homely looking mothers with pushchairs or toddlers in tow.

They're not breaking any law. In fact, they're exercising what many Americans believe is their God-given constitutional

right – the right to bear arms. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution allows citizens this right, while the association of firearms with freedom is deeply ingrained in American cultural history.

Those in the coffee shop are part of a new and controversial movement called Open Carry (OC), which means carrying a gun so it is visible. And it's actually women who, in many towns, are the most vocal advocates, arguing that guns are key to female empowerment, freedom and personal security. Recent months have seen OC activists stepping out with their weapons in cafes, bars and malls across the country to promote their cause. American Starbucks cafes have unwittingly become central to the OC movement and a meeting place for advocates. Unlike other chains such as Peet's Coffee & Tea and *{continued}*





Nineteen-year-old Caitlin Rutherford believes carrying a gun is 'empowering'



Firearms belonging to Michelle Rogers and her partner



Michelle carries a weapon full-time to protect her kids

California Pizza Kitchen, which have made a stand and forbidden guns, Starbucks has refused to be drawn into the dispute and formally ban guns, despite an anti-gun petition that was sent to its head office with 34,000 signatories.

Michelle Rogers, 28, from Lorton, Virginia, has two daughters aged four and two. She started open carrying three years ago when she was pregnant with her youngest daughter. Her weapon is a must-wear accessory whether she's having coffee with friends, taking her girls out to the park or just ironing at home. She has a one-word response if you ask why she carries a gun. 'Crime.' She says defiantly, 'When I was pregnant I kept thinking about women who'd been murdered for their babies. Afterwards I thought, "What

'At work they call me a right-wing nut job, but you see all these reports of people being killed'

if someone tries to take my girls?" Open carry is a big deterrent. People are less likely to try to kidnap my kids if they can actually see I'm armed. At work they call me a paranoid right-wing nut job, but you see all these news reports of people being killed, and you don't want it to be you.'

Michelle conceal carries only if she's wearing a dress. 'I'm not a fan of carrying it in my purse, as you constantly have to be thinking about where it is. I'm girlie about my gun. I chose it because it's beautiful

and I like it on show. It's a Sig Sauer P239 in 40 calibre that feels small in my hand and has custom grips.'

Open carry is legal in 43 states, but the different rules are so mind-boggling that you could be carrying a gun legally, then cross a street and be breaking the law. Until recently in Virginia, you were not able to carry a concealed gun in a restaurant that served alcohol – presumably so the staff could make sure you didn't get drunk.

Fear about crime is currently at fever pitch across America, despite the fact that over 50 per cent of firearm deaths are actually suicides, according to the American Bureau of Justice Statistics. The past ten years have, in fact, seen crime rates plummet across the country. Last year, the FBI's tally of violent crimes dropped to lows not seen since the 60s. Yet people are convinced crime has increased – 74 per cent of respondents in a 2009 Gallup poll said crime was getting worse.

Part of the reason for this is political. Research shows Democrats feel less safe when there's a Republican government and vice versa. When Obama came into office, Republican women – and most gun owners are Republican – became more afraid. There was what has been termed an 'Obama bump' in gun sales, as gun owners rushed to protect themselves or buy weapons before he could pass new laws regulating them. In a recent national survey*, 70 per cent {continued}

CELEBRITIES WITH GUNS



ASHTON KUTCHER AND DEMI MOORE

'She got a Glock and I got a Springfield. When the girls [Moore's three daughters] bring boys back to the house, I take them out and show them how to shoot.'



SARAH PALIN
'We need to send a strong

message that law-abiding citizens have the right to own firearms, for personal protection, for hunting and for any other lawful purpose.'



BRUCE WILLIS
'If you take guns away from legal

gun owners, then the only people who would have guns would be the bad guys. Even a pacifist would get violent if someone were trying to kill him.'

* National Shooting Sports Foundation and Southwick Associates, USA 2009

CELEBRITIES AGAINST GUNS



JODIE FOSTER

'Isn't it possible that we all have that bit of insanity in us? That's why I'm for gun control.'

Absolutely. I don't believe that people should have access to life-or-death situations at any emotional time in their life.'



SARAH JESSICA PARKER

'I'm the most anti-gun person you'll ever meet.'



DREW BARRYMORE

'I hate guns. There was no way we were running around with guns [with co-stars Cameron Diaz and Lucy Liu in the film *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*]. We wanted to show that, if we're going to be seen as role models, we don't have to empower ourselves by using guns.'



Carrie Moats' gun goes everywhere with her — except on first dates

of gun-shop owners reported more female buyers, most of whom were purchasing for self-defence purposes rather than for recreational use at shooting ranges.

'The problem is there is no dialogue going on between the pro- and anti-gun movements,' says Peter Hamm, communications director for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. 'The pro-gun people are protesting for "more rights", but what more rights do they need? Any criminal can go to a gun show and buy a gun. Now he can wear it in Starbucks, too. It's insanity.'

Another anti-gun campaigner, Heidi Yewman, says, 'I graduated from Columbine High School [Colorado], which was the scene of one of the biggest high-school shootings in the US. Twelve students died plus a teacher who taught me while I was there. That's when I started campaigning for more regulation. I don't want to ban guns completely, but this open carry thing

bothers me. I go to Starbucks every day and I don't feel safe if I see someone carrying a gun. I don't know if that person's a good or a bad person, or a well-intentioned person who's just having a bad day.'

School shootings like those at Columbine in 1999, and at Virginia Tech in 2007 in which 32 people died, made many people question the right to bear arms. It also inspired film-maker Michael Moore to make his documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, investigating America's love affair with firearms. 'The irony is that a lot of the time the person who buys the gun to protect himself or herself ends up being a victim of that gun, either from a family member, or from himself,' Heidi points out.

But for student Caitlin Rutherford, 19, from Carrollton, Virginia, the high-school shootings have reinforced her determination to be allowed to carry her firearm on the college campus. 'It's forbidden for students to be armed — although staff and anyone else can be — and I don't see the sense in that. A bad guy isn't going to follow the rules and leave his gun at home. If there were an incident like at Virginia Tech on campus, it would take only one

quick-thinking person with a gun to stop it. I'd "shoot to stop" rather than to kill, but if I had to kill someone to save innocent lives, I'd be prepared to do that.'

Caitlin has been shooting since she was 15 and started carrying as soon as it became legal for her at 18. Her stepmother, Jadranka, 54, is an accomplished shooter herself and carries her Magnum revolver every day, too. 'It's good that Caitlin knows

how to handle a gun. A gun makes a man and a woman equal, and every woman should know how to protect herself.'

Caitlin has no choice but to open carry, as under-21s can't get a concealed carry permit

in Virginia. 'It's not too much of a problem,' says Caitlin. 'I have a holster that clips onto whichever belt I'm wearing, and normally I'm in jeans. But I'd carry more often if I could conceal my gun. When I get my permit I'll buy a special purse to keep it in. I do get some looks while I'm out shopping, but I think it's empowering.'

Carrie Moats, 34, from Ashburn, Virginia, says it was a specific news story about two joggers killed in the local area that made her start carrying her gun. 'That story struck me because it {continued}

'Any criminal can go to a gun show and buy a gun. Now he can wear it in Starbucks'



Even at home, Michelle keeps her gun in full view

happened so close by,' she says. 'I'm single, live by myself, and I go for long walks with my black Labrador. I need to feel safe and having the gun on my hip helps. I now wear it while walking the dog, shopping at the mall - everywhere really. I get a few strange looks, but nobody has ever been rude or objected. If they ask why I'm carrying a gun, I explain my safety worries.'

On girls' nights out, Carrie often wears her Glock 19 on her hip. 'If I'm going out late I'll definitely carry, though not if I'm drinking.' But Carrie draws the line at carrying a gun on first dates. 'It's too much. But

I start carrying after a few dates. The men I see tend to agree with my views. If a man didn't want me to carry, I'd have second thoughts about him. I'd wonder why my safety wasn't important to him.'

Despite official government figures, the pro-gun camp maintains that guns reduce crime rather than increase it. John Lott, senior research scientist at the University of Maryland and author of *More Guns Less*

Crime, argues that crime is lower in areas where guns are permitted, although anti-gun campaigners vigorously dispute his arguments and research.

Olivia Topchy, 44, who runs Tactical Pink, a female-friendly gun training company in Northern Virginia, argues the onus is on individual citizens to protect themselves. 'The police's job is to solve

crime, not prevent it. It's up to you to defend yourself. I teach women to overcome their fear of firearms. You have to be mentally prepared to shoot to kill to save your own life. There's such a discrepancy in size and

strength between men and women, having a gun levels the playing field.'

But carrying a gun doesn't always protect the owner. Last October, open carry advocate Meleanie Hain was shot dead by her husband after a row. He then shot himself. OC friends, including Michelle, held a memorial shoot to raise money for her children. Michelle insists that guns were not to blame for Meleanie's death:

'I'm girly about my gun. I chose it because it's beautiful and I like it on show'

TOP GUNS



Weapons and holsters designed to be on display are specifically targeting the female market.

'If he hadn't had a gun, her husband would have found another way to do it.'

There are an estimated 200 million privately owned guns in the US. Despite the pro-gunners' fears, they're not going to be taken away anytime soon. Even the Brady Campaign doesn't advocate an outright ban - just more safety checks and controls. Handguns have been almost completely outlawed in the UK since 1997, but such a law is unlikely to be passed in the States.

'The more guns there are, the more people will want guns to protect themselves against all the other guns,' says Heidi. 'Pro-gun people say an armed society is a polite society, but that would only work if people never drank, never got angry, did drugs or made bad decisions. But we're human and we make mistakes.' With guns, those mistakes potentially become lethal ones. ■

Photographs by Eyevine, Rex