



**CSTS podcast series**  
***Let's Talk About Your Guns***  
**episode 205: GATEKEEPERS 2.0: FAMILY LAW**

**LESLIE HU:** I divorced my ex-husband Steve when Pierce was four years old.

**LESLIE HU:** He was involved with these like new age kind of psychic-y conspiracy theories. The government's trying to put us in internment camps was one of them. Obama is an Illuminati who came out of a cave in Colorado was one of them. And he wholeheartedly believed this.

**LESLIE HU:** And for a few years, we could manage it.

**LESLIE HU:** The real problem came when he got this doctor to write a vaccine exemption saying that Pierce had autoimmune disease, which he didn't.

But I had to let it go because there's just so many battles that I could pick every year.

But 2020 came around, and I get an email from the doctor saying, you know, Pierce is not up to date with vaccines. The laws of California are changing and they're not going to allow these exemptions as much anymore.

And then COVID happened. And I'm like, oh my God, Pierce cannot die of measles and cannot die of COVID. And I believe in vaccines. I've been vaccinated.

**LESLIE HU:** And so I hired a lawyer to go after medical custody, just medical custody.

So I went to court. Steve had brought in his anti -vax doctor and I had Pierce's actual pediatrician, a UCSF doctor who tested the actual vaccines on his back to make sure that he wasn't allergic or wouldn't have a lethal reaction. I did all these things in hopes



that like, I could calm Steve down, but he was convinced that if Pierce had this vaccine, he would die or get microchipped.

**LESLIE HU:** So the judge comes and said, I've read your reports. But to be honest, when I read it I'm inclined to give her medical custody. So we will start on the, pediatrician's recommendations of vaccines. And that was it. That's when the monster came out.

**LESLIE HU:** The next morning it's my day to pick Pierce up at school. He's not coming out, and so I looked at the teacher on duty and I said, where's Pierce? And they go, he didn't come to school today.

**LESLIE HU:** So I go down to Steve's house. So I'm knocking. And so I start calling his family, calling his friends. When I called his work, the assistant said, hi. And I'm like, do you know where Steve is? And she's like, no, he didn't show up for work today.

**LESLIE HU:** Steve was renting the apartment from his friend. I called his friend. He's like, don't know where he is, but I'll come in the city. I'm like, bring the keys because the police are going to break down the door. He's like, I don't want them to break down the door. OK, I'm on my way. So he comes to the city. The police are waiting there. He opens the door.

And then they tell me that Steve shot Pierce in his bed sometime around 5 in the morning.

And it seems like Steve tried to hang himself, but he was unsuccessful at it. So he shot himself in the head.

**DR CURT WEST:** Unfortunately, stories like Leslie Hu's are becoming more common.



Over the past decade, violence against children during court custody trials has been on the rise. On average, one child a week is murdered by a parent or stepparent during divorce, separation, child support, visitation, or custody negotiations<sup>1</sup>. The overwhelming majority of those murders are by firearm<sup>2</sup>.

**DR CURT WEST:** Divorce and separation often bring heightened tensions, and expose children to increased risk, especially when firearms are present in the household.

**DR CURT WEST:** What's the best way to keep children safe during that often stressful and volatile time of a divorce or custody dispute? Who has the power to make that happen? Having tough conversations about firearms and safety at this time... it could save a life.

**DR CURT WEST:** I'm Curt West, psychiatrist and scientist at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University. Today, in Let's Talk About Your Guns, we'll talk to Leslie Hu about how her experience as a grieving mother led her to call for changes in the way that lawyers, mediators, custody partners, and judges approach firearm storage. We'll also talk to Monica Mazzei, a family law attorney who is committed to safe-guarding families in times of crisis.

**DR CURT WEST:** Firearm safety in the home is built around five principles. Weapons should be stored unloaded. They should be taken apart or stored with a disabling device. They should be stored in locked containers. And ammunition should be stored in a separate locked container. Finally, firearm safety in the home involves having a plan in advance for storing guns in an alternate location during times of crisis.

**DR CURT WEST:** In this episode, we'll discuss how gatekeepers – people like family law attorneys – have a role in opening up conversations about firearm storage with two parties who are in an adversarial situation. And how to prevent that firearm from

<sup>1</sup> <https://centerforjudicialexcellence.org/2023/07/17/cje-releases-child-safety-report/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://centerforjudicialexcellence.org/2023/07/17/cje-releases-child-safety-report/>



becoming an instrument of violence in a time of conflict.

**DR CURT WEST:** Leslie, you shared that even though your relationship with your ex was contentious, his actions that day took you completely by surprise.

**LESLIE HU:** That's right. That's right. I mean, he was fighting to keep Pierce safe from COVID, like keep him alive from COVID. So I, it just didn't come into my world that he would do something like that. Although I could see him killing me for winning the case or for being told that my side was right and his side was wrong.

**DR CURT WEST:** But you were constantly sort of feeling this threat in the background, right? Because you knew he was controlling, you knew he was manipulative. So at this time, did he keep any guns at home that you knew of?

**LESLIE HU:** When we were married, he had one gun and then his father gave him eight. When we divorced, I said, I don't want guns around Pierce. That's as much as I could remember to do, honestly, at that moment. So yeah, I knew he had, I knew he had guns.

I didn't think about it. He was a threat to vaccines, not a threat with guns.

**DR CURT WEST:** Pierce's death was devastating for Leslie. It also affected her close circle of friends. One of those close friends was family lawyer Monica Mazzei.

**MONICA MAZZEI:** I found out what happened to Pierce from a mutual friend. Shock and disbelief were my initial reactions. I mean, I had just seen Pierce the week before. Leslie, Pierce's mom, is a good friend of mine. So when this tragedy happened with Pierce, it really struck me on a personal level, but also a professional level. I mean, family law is what I've done every day for over two decades. And I really had to think about, you know, what can I do, just myself, you know, to make sure that this doesn't



happen? And I just started writing in my engagement letters that my clients had to agree to store their firearm outside their home. It was a little thing, but it was something I can control and that I could do, you know, just myself.

**DR CURT WEST:** How did doing that cause you to look at these situations differently??

**MONICA MAZZEI:** I think my assumption was in the past that it was known that the parent that did this had a firearm. There must have been some knowledge about firearms in that case. And here, no one knew he had a firearm. No one asked. No one asked him. The court doesn't ask him. In Pierce's situation, there wasn't a domestic violence restraining order. So because of that, the court doesn't ask. And again, to no fault of the two attorneys involved in that case, none of us were asking our clients. So no one was asking this parent if they had a firearm. So then I thought, wow, I've got to ask everyone. And I mentioned it to Leslie, I told her what I was doing.

**DR CURT WEST:** So Monica's practice was the start of Pierce's Pledge. Leslie, can you talk to me about how this moved from Monica's personal practice to being more of an advocacy movement?

**LESLIE HU:** I kind of sat on it. I was not working, and I was obviously trying to grieve or heal or survive, whatever word you want to use for it. And one day I just thought about it, and I said, well, let's just ask every lawyer in the US, every family law attorney in the US, let's ask them this exact thing, to say, why don't I ask my clients to store their guns out of the firearms out of the home. Because in that year, I'd found out how many kids that die in the same way that Pierce is, that are murdered the same way as Pierce.

**DR CURT WEST:** Monica, as Leslie was telling us her story, she made it clear that the violence comes as a complete surprise to her. Is that the norm?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** People think that if a parent does this, they just, they must be some, you know, monster and everyone must have known, but that's not the case. Often, a lot of these parents, they're not outwardly showing that they're going to do this. So there is



a sense of disbelief, like I didn't see this coming. I think also what we don't talk about enough is in these situations where a parent murders their child during a custody dispute, the impetus is really coming from a domestic abuse motive, meaning the parent is not killing the child because they hate the child. They're killing the child to get back at the other parent.

**DR CURT WEST:** For our listeners who have listened to any of the other episodes, we always talk about safe storage. And this discussion is a little bit different in terms of this is not just about locking up your guns at home.

And my understanding is that your premise with Pierce's pledge, that's not enough that out of the house storage is the requirement. Monica, could you talk a little bit about the rationale behind that, just locking it up is not enough in these circumstances.

**MONICA MAZZEI:** The rationale for that is, in these situations that we've seen where a parent's taking their child's life in a family law matter, there tends to be some type of trigger. These situations don't seem to be premeditated, but to be reactive. So in a lot of situations, the parent who ultimately carries out these acts has received a negative result from the court. For example, in Leslie's case, the court had just ordered that Pierce was going to go ahead with some vaccines, and that's what Pierce's father was fighting against. So he received this adverse ruling, and he had a reaction to it, and he carried out this terrible act. There's another case out of California where the father received an adverse order from the court that was going to allow the mother to move away, move to another state with their child. And so in reaction to that adverse ruling, he took his child's life. So we know that these are not typically premeditated, but reactive. And because we know that, we can really impact the you know, the chances of this happening by removing from that parent's household, you know, any firearms they might own, right? That's something that we can take out of the equation. So part of Pierce's pledge is to encourage all family law attorneys all across the country to require that their clients who have are going through a family law case store their firearms outside of the home so we don't have them around in these high conflict, know,



emotionally charged situations.

**DR CURT WEST:** Can you talk a little bit more about the process by which a family law attorney engages into this agreement with their client?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** So I'll tell you how I go about engaging in this situation with my client in terms of having them remove their firearms. So when a client contacts me for a representation, I typically will send them an email that has several intake questions. And one of the questions that I always ask is if they own a firearm, so that at least I have that knowledge if they have one or not. That's something that, embarrassingly, I wasn't ever asking. If they want to retain me as counsel in their family law action, then they have to sign my engagement letter, which includes a provision that they agree to store their firearm outside the home during the case. They also have to provide me with proof that they've done so, like a receipt or an invoice where they've taken the gun to a private gun storage facility so that I can be sure that it's been removed. They will get their firearm back when the case has been concluded. It's just storing it outside of their ready reach during this time.

**DR CURT WEST:** When you tell potential clients about this requirement what kind of reactions do you get?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** You know, when I ask clients to do this, I get a lot of questions about why. And then I tell them about Pierce's pledge and I tell them about Pierce's story. And, you know, they're very moved by it. And totally understand why I'm asking this.

There's also an added benefit to this requirement. Statistics say that going through a divorce is the most traumatic life event other than death of a friend or a family member. It's such a great loss that there is a high suicide rate while people are going through the divorce process. So while Pierce's pledge is focused on gun safety and children in a divorce, you know, the same is true for the clients themselves. You know, it's not safe



to have a firearm around when, you know, when you're going through this really difficult time and emotions are up and down and people are experiencing depression. And, you know, so from that perspective also, which I do talk to my clients about it's best practice to store the gun somewhere else.

**DR CURT WEST:** And you do provide the access to that information for your respective clients as well when they when they agree to work with you?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** Yes. Pierce's Pledge last year created the very first private gun storage map that we've ever had in the United States. So in every state you could see the firearm licensees, that licensors that are willing to store firearms. It's for a fee, it's not free but you know that your firearm is safe there, and it's with someone licensed to store it.

**DR CURT WEST:** Can you tell me about how you compiled that gun storage map? How did you go about getting that information?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** We, Pierce's Pledge hired people to call federal firearm licensors just picking up the phone and calling and asking them if they would, you know, if they would take, if they would store firearms. Some of them already did and some of them, that wasn't part of what the service they were offering, but they said sure and that they would be included on the map. So it took, it took many, many months to put this together.

**DR CURT WEST:** Leslie, tell me about the reception, both positive and negative, of Pierce's Pledge when you approach family law practices or individual attorneys. Talk to me about the types of reactions that you get.

**LESLIE HU:** With the majority of the lawyers I would say because they're worried about the rights of their clients like but I don't want to infringe on the rights of their clients and we have to remind them that this is not an infringement on their right to bear arms. This is just saying that we know that divorce is a moment of high emotion. We're just asking





you if you'd be willing to ask your client to store. Because we've got so much pushback, we're now just saying, can you just start talking about firearms? Can you just bring up whether they have firearms? I think that's a good middle step. And in general, most lawyers are pretty agreeable to that.

**DR CURT WEST:** Monica? Are there reasons that family law attorneys are hesitant to take the pledge?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** think that family law attorneys are afraid that they'll lose business if they make it a requirement and that client doesn't want to agree to that, that they're gonna go elsewhere. And my response to that is, if enough of us are making this a requirement, then that doesn't have to be a concern, but we really need to get to the place where there's enough of us that are making it a requirement that it becomes more of the norm. For example, we all require our clients to pay us a retainer. So this is going to be no different, but it's going to take some time to get enough of us on board.

**DR CURT WEST:** You've heard of the term gatekeeper. Monica if I throw the term out gatekeeper, what do you, do you perceive yourself as a gatekeeper?

**MONICA MAZZEI:** I do, in my family law practice, I'm not only there to divide up the assets and determine support and address child issues, I'm also there to make sure that this process can go the best it possibly can. And I think that it's my responsibility to ask the hard questions, to ask if they have a firearm, to ask a client if I suspect that they may be thinking about harming themselves. I know now, and I think it's my obligation to ask them, right? And to, I'm not a therapist, but I'm on the front lines. I'm usually talking to my clients on a daily basis, or at least a weekly basis. So I'm very close to them, and I do feel an obligation that you have to look at the client holistically. I'm not just there to type up papers and file them, but I'm there to shepherd this person through this process.

**DR CURT WEST:** And I can just imagine that for most of these people, they are going through the worst time of their lives.



**MONICA MAZZEI:** Yes, for some clients more than others, a divorce or a custody dispute is absolutely devastating. They are at rock bottom. This is the most traumatic thing that they've ever experienced. And not all clients are in therapy during this process, which I encourage everyone to be in therapy, but not everyone is. It's overwhelming.

You know, words that I hear clients tell me is, you know, overwhelming, scared, afraid, you know, of what's next, angry, resentful. You know, you don't get a lot of positive emotions typically that are emanating out of this process.

**DR CURT WEST:** So from your perspective, involving family law attorneys in these conversations about firearm access is a natural fit.

**MONICA MAZZEI:** Why wouldn't family law attorneys be participating in making sure that children are safe? mean, part of our job involves children and their safety. And Pierce's pledge and storing firearms outside of the home is just one way to do that. In family law, at least in California, the focus any time that there is a custody issue is what is the best interest of the child? That's the test for most legal decisions involving custody in California. And if you extrapolate that and apply that to firearms in the home, what's in the best interest of the child to have the firearm sitting around the home when their parent might be depressed and angry? Or is it in the best interest of the child to store it outside the home? I can't think of any rational person that would disagree that it's not in the best interest of the child to remove the firearm from the home during this time.

**DR WEST:** You're emphasizing something that we always talk about in this podcast. That sometimes just putting some time and space between a person in crisis and lethal means is one way to prevent a tragedy. It sounds like it's applicable in these situations too.

**MONICA MAZZEI:** The statistics are showing us that the parents are using firearms.



And so if it's not there, I don't know if that parent would carry it out in a different way. They could have gone out and purchased a new firearm, right? But that takes a couple days. That is a cooling off period where maybe they're not as angry about the ruling. Maybe they've been able to process it better.

**DR WEST:** Leslie, what are your thoughts?

**LESLIE HU:** I do believe that if the gun wasn't in the house, Pierce would have had a chance. And a chance is all he needed, you know? A chance could have saved its life.

**DR WEST:** This podcast is about saving lives by putting time and space between an impulsive thought and a fatal act. There are all kinds of life circumstances that put us at risk for those impulsive thoughts. Today's story is a powerful example of how conflict in a relationship can be one of those times. Gatekeepers like attorneys come across people at those moments. And maybe it's time more of us started asking "are your guns stored securely"?

**DR WEST:** Thank you to Leslie Hu and Monica Mazzei for participating in today's discussion.

**PRESENTER:** You've been listening to Let's Talk about Your Guns. This podcast is made possible by The Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine and is produced by the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University in collaboration with Podville Media.

**PRESENTER:** To learn more about our mission and for additional resources, please visit [cstsonline.org](http://cstsonline.org).

**PRESENTER:** Be sure to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast app and leave a five-star review. Thank you for listening.



**PRESENTER:** The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Uniformed Services University, the Department of Defense, the US Government, or The Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc.

**PRESENTER:** Mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not necessarily constitute or imply endorsement by the Uniformed Services University, the Department of Defense, or the US Government or The Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc.