

This Gun Dealer Fights Illegal Trafficking

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BY TONY WEST/ For a gun dealer in Philadelphia, even one with a sterling reputation, life has its ups and downs.

On Mar. 30, Larry Haney, who owns the Shooter Shop in Kensington, received a letter of gratitude from the chief of the Gun Violence Task Force praising the dealer for his efforts to control illicit firearms trafficking.

On Apr. 2, Haney's shop was surrounded by hundreds of religious protestors demanding he sign their 10-point program on how to run his business.

In the long run, says Haney, it's the opinion of the DA's Office that matters more to him.

"The Shooter Shop complies with all the required regulations set by the City, State and federal governments," Haney asserts. "All firearms dealers must go through training sessions run by the police."

In the eyes of Albert J. Toczydowski, special assistant District Attorney for GVTF, Haney does more than that. In his letter, Toczydowski wrote, "This is written in recognition of the excellent cooperation of the Shooter Shop in combating illegal gun trafficking in the City of Philadelphia. Over the course of the past three years, you and your employees have furnished information on suspected straw purchasing which has led to numerous arrests and convictions, several within the past few months.

“Your efforts have helped to make our City a safer place to live and work. On behalf of the citizens of Philadelphia, please accept our thanks for your continued cooperation. To that let me add my personal thanks.”

Gun control relies on meticulous record-keeping at the point of sale. Every seller must be licensed by both the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Pennsylvania State Police. Every buyer must produce a picture ID and fill out a detailed application for ATF and another for the State Police.

The Shooter Shop requires a buyer to sign a third, in-house form in which they acknowledge they may not illegally transfer their weapon to anyone else. The store is filled with explicit warnings in plain English about the risks of illicit “straw purchasing”, in which a person with no criminal record buys a weapon on behalf of a third party who is legally forbidden to own one.

Immediately afterwards, the dealer calls the State Police to run a background check on the individual.

At the same time, Haney noted, a dealer faces statutory limits on what he can ask or learn about a customer. Gun-purchase records are confidential except to law-enforcement agents. When a check is run on a prospective buyer, Haney explains, “All a dealer is told is whether he can or cannot make that sale.” There are many different reasons why a person’s name may be flagged, not all of which point to criminal activity.

There are many reasons why strict confidentiality is required by law. One is to protect ongoing undercover investigations. Another is to protect customers from being targeted by thieves; stealing firearms is one way to get guns illegally that suits many a criminal’s lifestyle.

Well-maintained dealer’s records play a vital role in law enforcement. Haney spends a lot of his business time in court, testifying in gun-trafficking cases.

But Haney takes other steps at point of sale, relying on his 25 years in the field.

“Larry is experienced and you cannot set a value on that kind of experience, notes a prominent local surgeon who is a long-time customer of the Shooter Shop. “He has a good eye for people who are questionable and can be skeptical of people he does not know. He can be very strict.”

“If someone comes in trying to purchase a firearm from us and we get a bad feeling about that individual, we will not sell,” Haney says.

If a person is accompanied by friend who gives detailed advice to the supposed shopper, Haney's staff will talk only to the purchaser. Too much outside advice triggers a red flag in their eyes. A purchaser who doesn't seem to know much about weaponry, but insistently asks for a high-powered firearm that is out of a beginner's league, triggers a red flag.

"I'm like a psychiatrist, like a police officer. We're looking for someone who gives correct answers, makes good decisions and hasn't been coached," explains Haney.

The activists who gathered outside the Shooter Shop were organized by a group called Heeding God's Call. It has put on numerous rallies opposed to gun violence in the Philadelphia and Lancaster areas. The group has not charged the Shooter Shop with any misdeeds. Still, they want Haney to sign its "Responsible Firearms Retailer Partnership: A 10-Point Voluntary Code."

Haney says the code is meaningless. "Eight of its 10 points are already statutory requirements," he shrugs. "The other two are illegal."

A better approach to illegal gun sales, Haney says, is the Gun Violence Task Force. This innovative partnership between the State Attorney General, the Philadelphia DA and the Police Dept., was funded five years ago by State Sen. Anthony Williams and his then-colleague Vincent Fumo, is now pushing 450 arrests. "It has been a big help to this city," Haney says.

But its \$5 million in State funding was slashed by \$2 million for Fiscal Year '09-'10. That puts more strain on responsible gun dealers like Haney as they strive to do the right thing.