

Making a Difference

When the Doorbell Rings: Colleen Lawson of Chicago

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This spring the Supreme Court will hand down their decision regarding *McDonald v City of Chicago* which will determine the incorporation of the Second Amendment. Incorporation means that the federal law applies as well to the states and parts therein as to federal jurisdictions. This particular incorporation will mean that the individual right to keep and bear arms, decided in 2008 by the Supreme Court in *Heller v The City of Washington, DC*, is in effect in each of the several states.

The suit was begun with lofty ideals, as noted in the Second Amendment Foundation press release of June 26, 2008. Attorney Alan Gura said, "Our goal is to require state and local officials to respect our Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms. Chicago's handgun ban, and some of its gun registration requirements, are clearly unconstitutional." His colleague, Chicago attorney David G. Sigale, continued, "The right to defend our homes and families against those who would do them harm ... is one of the principles upon which America was founded. It is time the City of Chicago trust its honest, law-abiding residents with this Constitutional right."

"The city has been denying gun owners their civil rights for a long time and I think this lawsuit could

have a profound effect on their registration law," ISRA Executive Director Richard Pearson added.

This is more than a monumental legal event. It is also a story of individual lives. We should remember that although two years ago the Supreme Court heard Dick Heller's case against the city of Washington, DC, because legally he was the only one who had standing, the case began with Shelly Parker, who was terrorized by the drug dealers who had overwhelmed her neighborhood. Cases heard before the Supreme Court must meet stringent criteria. Public outrage originates with the knowledge of the impact of government policies on private citizens.

Colleen Lawson's connection with history began on a day when she did not go to work as usual. That day she stayed home, because she was sick. She was upstairs in bed when three men arrived on her porch. The house was quiet and appeared empty. They rang the doorbell, but it was not working.

Satisfied that no one was inside, the men first took some newly delivered packages from the porch. Then they began working to break in the door.

Hearing a strange noise, Colleen got up to investigate. When she reached the door, she found herself face to face with three strangers. They disappeared as she called the police. After investigating the premises and hearing her story, one of

the responding officers showed her that the door had been damaged so much that he could push it in with his finger. There was a slight "click!" and the door opened.

The policeman explained how criminals target certain homes. They pick a house that looks empty. They ring the doorbell or knock to see if anyone answers. If there is no response, they assume no one is home. The Lawson house had seemed a perfect target. There was no one moving around. It was quiet. The packages left outside increased the appearance that no one was around. The thieves did not realize that the doorbell did not ring.

Until that day, Colleen had not thought of needing anything with which to protect herself. She had little interest in guns. "Growing up in Chicago it seemed that most people, parents and grandparents, had them," and it was a natural thing to have." It was not something she had even thought about. But, now she did.

Like many women Colleen decided that a handgun would be the best tool for self-protection. So she selected a gun she would like to have and went downtown to find out how to register it. There she learned that what she had always considered a natural thing was no longer legal.

She filled out the registration form that was consequently denied because all handguns are illegal in Chicago. (There is a quirky rule about the registerable guns in Chicago. They must be registered before they can be possessed. A bit of bureaucratic circularity that can be considered nothing other than an obstacle to law-abiding citizens. The

rational mind rebels at the concept of registering something that one does not possess.)

Denied the means of self-protection, Colleen returned home where for over 18 months she lived in fear of what waited outside when the doorbell rang. She was afraid of every odd sound in the house. She would think, "Can I get down fast enough" so that the possible invader would realize someone was home. She also worried about what would happen when they discovered there was a lone woman in the house.

The police were always helpful

or peephole.

Still, fear was not her overriding emotion. Colleen is a determined lady. She threw her energy into creating something positive out of her predicament. "It was wrong and I did not accept it. That was my strong side. I refused to accept the situation. I knew it was wrong and knew I had to do something to change it."

She saw that it affected many people; that it was not simply about herself and her family. "Any woman is interested in protecting her family," she says emphatically. "We always had the right to have

the ability to exercise their right will be returned to them so they too can defend themselves in their own homes." Colleen was ready to fight for the rights of herself, her neighbors, and all her countrymen.

The time was perfect. The Supreme Court had just ruled in *Heller* that there is an individual right to keep and bear arms. In the beginning when Colleen and her husband, David, were included in the *McDonald v City of Chicago* suit, she was afraid that they might become targets of those who did not approve of what they were doing. This did not happen.

"I did not expect the paucity of coverage by the Chicago media." That lack of coverage, though, helped allay her worries of retribution.

Through everything, she has been comforted by the support of friends and strangers alike. She has felt overwhelming backing for the cause she has undertaken. (It's) "made me feel I'm not alone. I have my supporters here with me."

Still, even today her first reaction to the doorbell is dread. When they were in Washington, DC, for the oral arguments before the Supreme Court, Otis McDonald's wife admitted to her that she, also, is afraid when the doorbell rings.

Because, still, Colleen and countless like her, are denied the means to protect themselves in their own homes. Without the means to protect themselves, they are effectively denied their right to life itself. (You might be interested to know that Shelly Parker moved. The city neither protected her, nor allowed her to protect herself.)



Colleen Lawson is one of four individual plaintiffs in the *McDonald* suit now before the Supreme Court. She has been a gun rights activist in her home state of Illinois for several years, and has lately stepped upon the national stage.

and supportive, but they also were always at least a half-hour away when the men tried to break in. The burglars returned three times. On one occasion the police had been gone only a few minutes, when the perpetrators returned. Colleen was just inside and banged loudly on the door. She heard someone say, "Oh, s__t." When they returned, the police showed her how a burglar could crouch down so that he couldn't be seen through a window

guns in Chicago. It has only been banned for 27 years."

Colleen knew that she was not the only one who had a need to take care of herself, but that anyone could need to exercise the basic right of self-defense. Her city was thwarting her capacity to self-preservation, one of the most basic of human rights.

"A lot of people in Chicago, although not speaking publicly, are looking forward to the time when