

BROCK'S BANTER: Leaders of Tomorrow

By Brock Weir

'Fight for your life before it's someone else's job.'

These were the poignant words that echoed in my ears on Saturday watching hundreds of thousands of students and likeminded supporters taking over the streets of Washington, D.C., Manhattan, and dozens of other cities around North America, including close at home in Toronto, demanding action.

They were voiced, with strength and determination, by Emma Gonzalez, a student at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, and a survivor of the shooting, an act of domestic terrorism, that left several of her fellow students dead or wounded.

The weeks since the attack have seen a nearly unprecedented groundswell of support calling for a change in the status quo. It might be a groundswell led by a group of relatively young Americans, but their calls for reform are resonating with fellow citizens of just about every age and background.

The only ones who don't seem to be fully on board with their fight are those who are dyed-in-the-wool partisans who either benefit from the status quo every day of their lives, or somehow derive a degree of self-satisfaction from palming an instrument of war, or at least having it close at hand in the event of, I don't know, the zombie apocalypse or in case one's manhood is called into question.

'Six minutes and about 20 seconds,' she continued. 'In a little over six minutes, 17 of our friends were taken from us, 15 were injured, and everyone, absolutely everyone, was forever altered. Everyone who was there understands, everyone who has been touched by the cold grip of gun violence understands. Because they refused. No one could comprehend the devastating aftermath of how far this reach or where this could go. For those who still can't comprehend because they refuse to, I'll tell you where it went: right into the ground, six feet deep.'

'Six minutes and twenty seconds with an AR-15 and my friend Carmen would never complain to me about piano practice. Aaron Feis would never call Kira 'Miss Sunshine.' Alex Schachter would never walk into a school with his brother Ryan. Scott Beigel would never joke around with Cameron at camp. Helena Ramsey would never hang out after school with Max. Gina Montalto would never wave to her friend Liam at lunch. Joaquin Oliver would never play basketball with Sam or Dylan. Alaina Petty would never. Cara Loughran would never. Chris Hixon would never. Luke Hoyer would never. Martin Duque Anguiano would never. Peter Wang would never. Alyssa Alhadeff would never. Jamie Guttenberg would never. Meadow Pollack would never.'

Emma was joined at the podium by David Hogg, who had a pointed message for those in power.

'The winter is over,' he said. 'Change is here. The sun shines on a new day, and the day is ours. First-time voters show up 18 per cent of the time at midterm elections. Not anymore. Now, who here is going to vote in the 2018 election? If you listen real close, you can hear the people in power shaking. They've gotten used to being protective of their position, the safety of inaction. Inaction is no longer safe. And to that, we say: No more.'

'When politicians say that your voice doesn't matter because NRA owns them, we say: No more. When politicians send their thoughts and prayers with no action, we say: No more. Today is the beginning of spring and tomorrow is the beginning of democracy.'

Looking on, it struck me that while many of those who spoke on Saturday were of voting age or will be at that point, or close to it, by the time the American mid-terms roll around this fall many of them were not.

They were there to lend their voices to the fight, young voices, sure, but they were voices that were educated, informed, and yearning to participate in the process.

Canada, Ontario, and Aurora might not have mid-term elections this fall, but, over the next year or so, we have no shortage of opportunity.

The Provincial election will be held on June 7 while municipal elections across the Province will take place at the end of October. Fast forward a year or so, and Canadians from coast-to-coast will be heading to the polls Federally as well.

And yet, despite the best efforts of all concerned, there seems to be little political will to give our own slate of informed, engaged and impressive youth an outlet through which their voices can effect real change and perhaps a change in the very business of public life.

Ontario had a brief flirtation with this earlier this month when Toronto area MPP Arthur Potts introduced a Private Members' Bill to change the Election Amendment Act to reduce the eligible voting age from 18 to 16.

'A number of jurisdictions around the world have lowered the voting ages in order to increase engagement,' he said in his pitch.

'When the voting age was lowered to 16 in Scotland, prior to their Independence Referendum, youth turnout soared to 75 per cent.'

?In Ontario's political system, young people can already become a member of a political party at the age of 14 and, in doing so, can help shape the political platforms and choose the party candidates that will ultimately form government. Many are actively engaged in fashioning party policy, yet don't have the right to vote on who will represent them in the Legislature.?

This Private Members' Bill was one of the many pieces working their respective ways through the legislature which died an untimely death when the legislature was prorogued this month, only to re-open a few days later with a new throne speech and promise of a new budget.

Some might have been pleased by a few pieces of legislation going belly-up in the process, but I hope this is one piece of business that is refreshed and debated while momentum is still in its favour.

If the youth are taking the time to become engaged and fight for the issues they are passionate, providing them with a chance to have a real impact is a simple move with which we will all win in the end.