

Farewell to GFSA's founding director Adèle Kirsten

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As GFSA celebrates its 30th anniversary, Adèle Kirsten, GFSA's founding director has stepped down as head of one of the only organisations focused on reducing gun violence in SA. She reflects on her journey, GFSA's achievements and the urgency of addressing SA's gun violence crisis



How did you become the founder of Gun Free South Africa

I was politically active in the 80s in the struggle for freedom and justice in South Africa through my work in the End Conscription Campaign (supporting young white men who refused to serve in the Apartheid army) and the Five Freedoms Forum. I was also involved in nonviolent direct-action training and am committed to both the theory and practice of nonviolence as a means to bring about lasting social justice and peace. I then worked in the Wits Vaal Peace Secretariat exploring ways to de-escalate the high levels of violence, especially on the East Rand (now Ekurhuleni), and helped establish a rapid response network of unarmed young people, trained in conflict resolution and emergency services to operate in areas particularly affected by high levels of violence during the early years of the political transition leading up to the first democratic general election of 1994. During this period there was a significant influx of guns into the country and in the lead up to the first general election in 1994, firearm licence applications peaked, with just over 236 000 new licences issued that year. Working with Sheena Duncan (President

of the Black Sash) and Bishop Peter Storey (Methodist Bishop) in the Wits Vaal Peace Secretariat we realised that the country was now awash with guns and perhaps one of the biggest threats to our new democracy. The idea of gun free campaign emerged out of that context and in 1995 Gun Free South was formed and I was its first Director – it seemed like the logical next step in my journey as an activist.

What were your most memorable gun cases that you will never forget

This is a tough question to answer – there have been so many horrible, tragic, preventable gun deaths over the 30 years. I have chosen a few (mainly over the last 10 years) not just because they are seared in my memory but also because they show how gun violence affects all of us and takes many different forms. Six-year-old Leeana van Wyk from Hanover Park was playing outside her home with a friend in November 2012 when she was shot in the head, caught in the crossfire between two rival gangs. Her life hanging by a thread she spent several months in Red Cross Children's Hospital. In 2015 her story is told once more when ex-cop

Christiaan Prinsloo appears in the Belville Magistrate's court for stealing over 2000 guns from the state armoury and selling them to gang leaders on the Cape Flats. Today, Leeana and her guardian are part of the GFSA [class action lawsuit](#) against the Minister of Police.

A few months before that the unforgettable scene of the bodies of mine workers strewn across the veld and in the koppies, killed by police officers using R5 rifles, known as the Marikana massacre.

The murder of Reeva Steenkamp on Valentines Day 2013 by her boyfriend Oscar Pistorius not only shook the South African public as we woke to the news that morning; it reverberated around the world because of Pistorius' fame as a Paralympic icon and champion. And it would be with us for several years, with the intense media scrutiny and permission to film in the courts. A cruel reminder that neither wealth nor fame protects against gun violence, and it raised the flag once again about the high levels of violence experienced by women at the hands of men. It also demonstrated how the gun law had failed in that Pistorius should never have been declared fit to own a firearm given his history of misuse of guns. One of the reasons I always remember this shooting is I had just been appointed to do some lobbying and advocacy for GFSA after a 12-year break, and it was my first week back on the job with massive media interest and demand and I was a bit rusty.

The [mass shootings](#) that started in 2022 in a Soweto tavern, with over 16 people shot dead, mainly young people. And it has not stopped. Some months two or three mass shootings – in Khayelitsha, KwaMashu, Mannenberg, and the 18 people, mostly women, shot in Lusikisiki on 28 September 2024. These represent a new trend, now an established pattern signalling the easy availability of guns and ammunition.

The stories of the nine [class action litigants](#) – the victims and survivors of Prinsloo's guns: Dillan Cornelius, Dudley Richards, Leeana van Wyk, Liam Davids, Lukas Dirks, Mansoer Eksteen and his mother Shamiela, Mogamat Moeneer and Mogamat Nazeer Julies and Niezaam Cupido.

And now the everyday gun violence in SA – the names come and go, only to be filled by yet another name, another (most often) young person, shot and killed.

What will you do now you've left GFSA

The scale and the pace of working on the issue of gun control and trying to reduce gun violence has absorbed every part of me. I want to slow down, just a little, to do more of what I love doing which includes swimming in the ocean, kayaking, gardening, reading and spending more time with my life partner exploring new places to visit both in the city and also along the West Coast – as a relatively new arrival to Cape Town, I know very little of this landscape. I have been urged by the class action families from Mitchells Plain that visiting places like Lamberts Bay, Yzerfontein and Langebaan Lagoon must be on my priority list!

I am also looking forward to having more space to think about the issue of gun violence in new ways, having more time to read the latest research. This will be important as I will be working with Professor Naeemah Abrahams from the MRC and who is a Commissioner with the Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health. There are eight commissions, and we will be working on three of them, namely, the legal determinants of global health and laws on firearm violence; social economic and commercial determinants of gun violence; and community action and case studies.

What needs to be done to address SA's current gun violence crisis?

GFSA has a clear programme of action which identifies three priority areas for action:

- Reduce the circulation of guns in our society
- Enforce the Act
- Strengthen the law

All of these actions will help reduce the availability of guns which in turn will reduce the supply of guns thereby curbing the illegal trade and use of guns in crime.

Reducing the circulation of guns requires intelligence-driven policing aimed at recovering crime guns from crime scenes, doing a track and trace investigation on each gun which will help determine its source (i.e. loss or theft from state institutions, the police, civilians, and private security); and this will help determine where efforts must be concentrated to stop the leakage of guns from the legal into the criminal market.

Enforcing the Act means applying the maximum sentence for illegal possession of a firearm which is 15 years imprisonment. Fixing the Central Firearms Registry has to be a priority as keeping an accurate central record-keeping system of all licensed guns, permits, etc, remains a cornerstone of effective gun control.

Strengthening the law essentially means the Minister of Police tabling the Firearms Control Amendment Bill in Parliament as soon as possible.

What have been highlights which you had an impact on

The single biggest achievement was lobbying for a new gun law in the late 90s and helping establish a broad coalition of organisations supporting stricter gun control. Many of the people joining the coalition had never been to parliament and

this was one of the first times that ordinary people were able to directly address MPs and inspire them to craft the best possible legislation to effectively control guns in this country. Being in Parliament in late 2000, sitting in the public gallery and hearing the votes come in in favour of passing the Firearms Control Act of 2000 – such a big thrill to see the concrete manifestation of collective work and energy. And then when the first research results started coming out and the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMMS) showed that over an almost ten year period, our gun deaths had nearly halved – from 34 gun deaths a day in 1998 to 18 gun deaths in 2009; a year later this same trend was confirmed when the MRC published their ten year femicide review (1999 – 2009) showing that the number of women killed by their intimate partner with a gun had almost halved, resulting in a reduction in IPV from 4 being killed every day, to 3 women killed daily.

GFSA was amicus curiae in several matters related to issues of the constitutionality of aspects of the FCA including the provision for the renewal of firearm licences. In one instance the matter ended in the Constitutional Court, with the judgment supporting the Minister of Police, and in the preamble to the judgment asserting that firearm ownership in South Africa under the Bill of Rights is not a right but a privilege under the law. This was a significant victory.

The use of media advocacy as a tool to help shape and influence the debates and agenda on the issue of gun control and gun violence prevention. One example of this is when editorials reflect that gun violence is a scourge which requires urgent attention.

Lastly and a fitting note on which to end is the promise of the President in the 2025 SONA about needing to prioritise gun crime and violence as the most effective way to reduce overall crime. ■