

HEALTH HERO

The Good Fight

A trauma surgeon champions gun reform.

Joseph V. Sakran, MD, could tell the students weren't really listening to his statistics about gun violence. He hadn't originally planned to share his personal story with this group of Philadelphia high schoolers until after their tour of one of the trauma centers at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a fellow. But faced with that adolescent here-but-not-here look, he impulsively opened up along the way: When he was 17, he told the students, he almost died. After a high school football game in a suburb of Washington, D.C., he went with friends to a nearby park, where a gunman shot into the crowd during a fight that didn't involve Sakran. He knew he'd been shot only because his white shirt was suddenly red; he realized the bullet had gone into his throat only when his buddies laid him down on the sidewalk and he started choking on blood.

Sakran's experience altered the course of his life—it was the reason he became a trauma surgeon and did his residency at the hospital that saved him. But until that day in 2012, he hadn't appreciated the power of his story. As he spoke, the teens were riveted. "How many of you have experienced gun violence?" he asked. Almost every hand went up.

From that day on, Sakran knew he wanted to treat gun violence outside the operating room, and later that year, after 26 people were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, he got to work. He subsequently completed a master's in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School and received national attention in 2014 when he started the grassroots advocacy group Doctors for Hillary, which supported Clinton's gun control platform.

Though his candidate lost the election, Sakran didn't lose hope. In November 2018, after the American College of Physicians published recommendations for reducing firearm violence, the



Sakran on Capitol Hill, urging lawmakers to #DoSomething and support background checks for gun purchases, 2019. Bottom: Performing surgery in Rwanda, 2014.



The worst day of my life ended up shaping the narrative of what I do.

—JOSEPH V. SAKRAN, MD

National Rifle Association tweeted, "Someone should tell self-important anti-gun doctors to stay in their lane." Many physicians responded with hashtags like #ThisIsOurLane or #ThisIsMyLane, sharing their experiences with gun-related trauma in words and pictures: blood-spattered operating rooms, the waiting room chairs in which parents are told their kids have died. Sakran then created the Twitter handle @ThisIsOurLane to aggregate and amplify the voices. After the first day, it had 500 followers; today it has more than 30,000.

Social media efforts like Sakran's do more than just raise awareness—they can help providers feel more comfortable speaking out, says Therese S. Richmond, PhD, professor and associate dean at Penn's School of Nursing, who has worked with gun victims for decades. "Even though poll after poll shows that most Americans support some degree of gun control, it's such a partisan issue. Many healthcare professionals are afraid to talk about gun violence," she says. "Yet, can you

imagine if you went to the ER with a heart attack and they said, 'It's not my job to talk to you about heart disease; I can only treat your symptoms and send you on your way'? We'd call it malpractice."

But Sakran isn't letting politics silence him. Last September, he began a year-long Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy fellowship in D.C., where he'll learn the federal legislation process. As Richmond explains, it's essential for providers, researchers, and legislators to collaborate. "We need to use data and experience to inform and evaluate policy, because not everything works the way we think it will," she says. "We don't have to be pro- or anti-gun. We have to change the conversation: How do we keep people safe?"

That's the question that drives Sakran. "People have asked, 'When are you running for office?'" he says. "But I'm already serving the public by taking care of patients and advocating for policies that will prevent other people from needing the second chance I got." —RACHEL MABE

