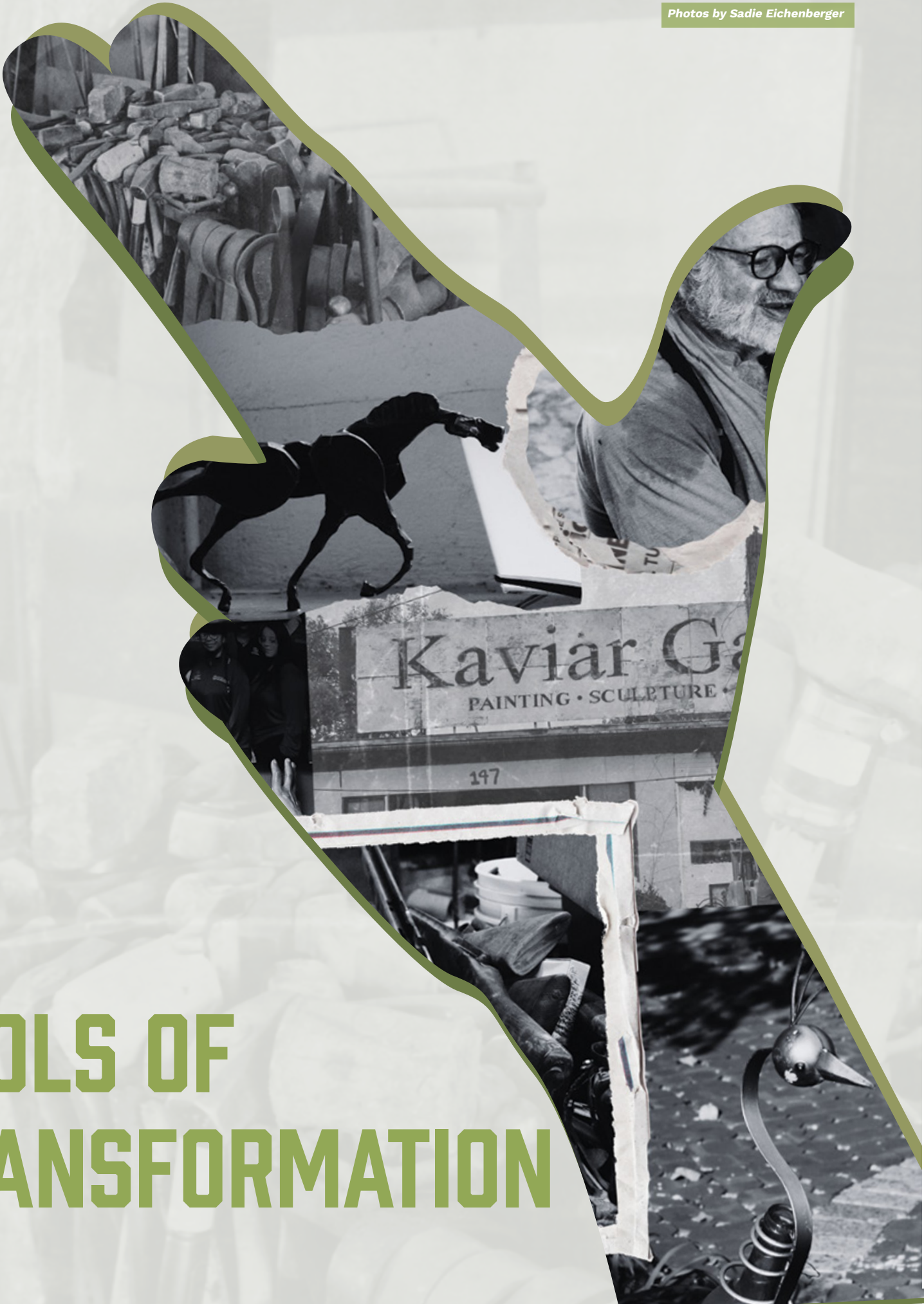


Photos by Sadie Eichenberger

TOOLS OF TRANSFORMATION



Gun violence is decreasing nationally, but Louisville remains a hot spot — especially for youth. Guns to Gardens Louisville works to fight this trend despite restrictive legislation.

writing by LUKE BOGGS • design by YINA HWANG

The first woman drove a light blue Mini Cooper. The shotgun sat heavy in the back of her trunk, its rusted coat sealed with years of neglect. She had inherited it from her deceased husband, a relic of the past that didn't serve her any purpose.

Next came a large, red Ram truck. Like the woman before, the driver carried multiple aged shotguns in the bed of his pickup. Seated in the bolstered height of the vehicle, he awaited the transfer of the firearms from his truck to the disposal tent.

The third man drove a gray Hyundai, a seemingly new revolver in its trunk. The parking lot was filled with dozens of volunteers in bright orange vests, who took his firearm and started the disassembling process.

The Guns to Gardens Louisville event was in full swing.

Cars crept through the parking lot of Grace Hope Presbyterian Church, each vehicle moving with a quiet purpose, bringing their weapons to the operation's center. The volunteers worked swiftly, moving guns from the cars' trunks into bins to be greeted by screwdrivers, hammers and electric saws. From there, the guns were turned into gardening tools, art and jewelry. This process represents a small but meaningful step toward change, a change that aims to uplift a young community disproportionately impacted by violence.

In 2024, the age demographic with the highest number of non-fatal shootings in Louisville was 18 to 24-year-olds.

The Louisville Metro Gun Violence Dashboard anonymously surveyed some of Louisville's youth who have been or might be impacted by this threat in their community.

"I'll do anything to stay safe. That's why I carry a gun or knife," one respondent said.

"I'm on edge all the time. I can't be caught off guard," another said.

"I worry about my little brother getting shot," a third source explained.

However, many of these young people are uninformed about the disproportionate impact of violence on their generation compared to others. In a city with such a high percentage of youth impacted by gun violence, anti-violence organizations like Guns to Gardens are essential to creating a better future and breaking this cycle of fear.

Guns to Gardens

Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, the national Guns to Gardens group launched to address the urgent need for peaceful approaches against gun violence.

Guns to Gardens works to combat gun violence through its safe-surrender events, which are annual opportunities to turn in firearms. Once relinquished, they

are rewarded with a \$50 Kroger gift card. The organization then repurposes the weapons by melting and molding them into metal goods, primarily gardening tools like shovels and hoes.

Guns to Gardens Louisville began in 2018 after a group of people from the Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church congregation created the Gun Violence Prevention Team.

"We found out that there was a national group doing Guns to Gardens," said Eva Stimson, a volunteer for the Louisville chapter. "We were intrigued by that."

Aiming to broaden their reach, they partnered with RAWtools and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship to expand their initiative, insisting that they create their own local branch of Guns to Gardens. Acquiring and managing the funds for the Louisville chapter took time, but they modeled their approach in cities where Guns to Gardens had already been implemented, like Buffalo, Denver and Asheville.

In order to mitigate the unsafe disposal of firearms, the committee researched the best way to run their local branch.

"What could we do about gun violence? None of us own guns or even know how to operate guns," Stimson said. "It's mostly women in our group and older women like me, so it was kind of an odd thing, but we felt very strongly about this issue because kids should not be getting shot in schools."



“There’s no good way of getting rid of guns in Kentucky.”

- Eva Stimson, Guns to Gardens Louisville volunteer

After frequent meetings, they secured 12 places of worship across the city, ranging from Baptist churches to synagogues. Four years of planning led to Guns to Gardens Louisville’s first safe-surrender event in December of 2022.

Though few guns were turned in, the word was out: the Courier Journal covered the event, Kentucky Life documented the gun melting process and The New York Times interviewed Craig Kaviar, the blacksmith for Guns to Gardens Louisville.

Kaviar’s skills and resources are essential for the organization’s operation, with over 60 years of blacksmithing experience, as well as his own facility, Kaviar Forge.

Since the extensive coverage of the first event, Louisvillians have given up a total of 88 guns.

“Each person has their own thing, but there are guns people no longer want, that they inherited,” Kaviar said. “There are guns that their spouse had and there are suicides.”

The painful backstories behind some firearms emphasizes the need for safe gun disposal — unused or not — because any weapon has the potential to kill again.

However, Guns to Gardens Louisville’s efforts are hindered by laws governing the redistribution of used firearms.

The Cycle Continues

Kentucky Revised Statute (KRS) 16.220, a piece of state legislation instituted in 1998, mandates that guns that have been displaced or used in a homicide must be transferred to the Kentucky State Police Department and sold at a public auction.

Supporters of this statute believe that the earnings from the auction fund necessary state departments that keep the commonwealth safe. 80% of the profit made from each auction is streamlined to the Kentucky Department of Homeland Security, while the remaining 20% is given to the Kentucky State Police Department to buy body armor.

Organizations like Guns to Gardens view it from a different perspective. Despite the inherent good that comes from additional funding to safety departments, guns sold in auctions have the potential to end up back on the streets. It’s unclear as to how many auctioned firearms are used in crimes, though a 2021 Courier Journal investigation of Kentucky and Louisville police records uncovered more than two dozen examples of guns sold at auctions later resurfacing in criminal cases across the country.

“When Mayor Greenberg was elected, what he tried to do was make those guns inoperable,” said Mike Bassi, the regional director of the Southern Police Academy Institute at the University of Louisville. “I don’t think that worked because you can obviously put those things back in again and make them operational.”

However, Mayor Craig Greenberg also ordered the Louisville Metro Police Department to affix stickers on the confiscated firearms before sending them to the Kentucky State Police Department, reading, “WARNING. Deadly weapons like

this one caused 146 homicides by gunshot wound in Louisville in 2022. Fourteen of those deaths were children.”

With legislation like KRS 16.220 lingering over Guns to Gardens Louisville, smaller issues are often overlooked, like finding places of worship willing to host their events or police surveillance of their chosen location.

As groups like Guns to Gardens Louisville face these challenges, some elected officials have attempted to address the potential risks of rereleasing firearms by finding creative legal solutions.

In 2024, Kentucky House Representative Keturah Herron filed House Bill 325, which would allow for the destruction of firearms once confiscated, forfeited or abandoned. However, it did not pass its first reading in the Committee on Committees. Kentucky Senator Karen Berg filed a similar bill in 2023, Senate Bill 168, which aimed to render the firearms inoperable throughout Kentucky. Though it was introduced to the Senate Veterans, Military Affairs, & Public Protection Committee, the bipartisan bill didn’t make it past a second hearing, whereas bills expanding open carry and preventing the enforcement of federal firearm bans received committee conferences.

“Those are the bills that are getting hearings, those are the bills that are getting attention,” Berg said in a 2023 interview with Spectrum News.

Violence following a gun’s confiscation alarms lawmakers and civilians alike. Though efforts have been made by both groups to alter this cycle, many have been unsuccessful.

Regardless of whether this call for change is through protests or legislation, it is unlikely that guns will ever fully be eradicated from the hands of criminals.

“This is not new. This is old. This has been going on and going on and going on,” Berg said. “It’s just getting worse.”

This sentiment is echoed by Stimson, who, after analyzing the pattern of how guns are processed and resold, reached a grim realization.

“There’s no good way of getting rid of guns in Kentucky,” Stimson said.

... The challenges presented by Kentucky’s gun disposal laws hinder progress toward Guns to Gardens’ goal of turning violence into hope. The tragic irony is that, while laws like KRS 16.220 are intended to fund safety initiatives, they ultimately fail to address the fundamental issue at the heart of gun violence: the guns themselves.

Louisville’s youth hold the potential to be powerful advocates for a safer Kentucky, but remain the most affected by gun violence. Without addressing the legal barriers that allow firearms to re-enter circulation, efforts to protect young people and reduce violence will remain limited.

Despite the barriers preventing Guns to Gardens from keeping these weapons completely off of the streets, the organization continues their peaceful efforts moving toward a less violent future. •

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Video by Samiyah Taylor



Sparks - Blacksmith Craig Kaviar dismantles a gun brought to the Guns to Gardens safe-surrender event on Nov. 11. Each gun is deconstructed immediately at the event. *Photo by Iris Apple.*