



NOT
WATTS
SHE
SEEMS

SHANNON WATTS

MICHAEL BLOOMBERG
IS BANKROLLING “MOMS
DEMAND ACTION,” WITH
SHANNON WATTS
AS HIS STAND-IN,
STAY-AT-HOME MOM.

BUT A CLOSER LOOK
REVEALS HER COVER STORY
TO BE PAPER-THIN.

Astroturf was introduced to the world in 1966 by the Houston Astros baseball team at their indoor AstroDome ballpark. The greatest user of Astroturf today is former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, with his supposed “grassroots” organization that calls itself “Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America” (MDAG).

In truth, the group is not “grassroots.” And it’s not for sensible gun laws, but gun prohibition.

Here’s how MDAG founder Shannon Watts describes herself for her *Huffington Post* column:

“For the past five years, Ms. Watts has been a stay-at-home mom in Zionsville, a suburb of Indianapolis, Ind. Prior to that, she had a 15-year career as a communications executive for both public relations agencies and Fortune 500 corporations. Ms. Watts was not an activist or involved in gun issues prior to the shootings at Sandy Hook on Dec. 14, 2012. The day after

the tragedy, she started a Facebook page called Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. Since then, Moms Demand Action has become a nonprofit organization with tens of thousands of members and more than 80 local chapters across the country. Ms. Watts’ goal is for Moms Demand Action to become the Mothers Against Drunk Driving of safe gun laws.”

Much of that biography, which was originally posted in January 2013, is false or misleading. Had Watts “been a stay-at-home mom” for the previous five years? Not exactly. In December 2008, Watts announced the formation of her

by DAVE KOPEL



public relations firm, VoxPop Public Relations, including an impressive list of clients for which she was already working. The registered address for her PR firm was a residence, so presumably she was running her PR firm out of her house. Her children were all well into school-age or older, so it's likely that she had plenty of time to run her business during the day.

Watts' biography on LinkedIn.com states that she ran the public relations firm until June 2012. Also, for the 20 months ending in June 2012, she was a consultant for the large public relations firm FleishmanHillard. Also, in May 2010, Watts and her husband opened the Watts Fine Art gallery in Zionsville, Ind.

There's nothing wrong with that, except "running a streetfront art gallery plus public relations business from my house" is not the impression conveyed by "stay-at-home mom."

Is it true that Watts was not "an activist or involved in gun issues" before December 2012? Her *Huffington Post* biography mentions nothing about her political career, but according to her biography on LinkedIn.com, from 1993 to 1998 she was a public affairs officer for Missouri Gov. Mel Carnahan, the Missouri House of Representatives and the Missouri Department of Economic Development. (As her LinkedIn biography shows, Watts has sometimes used Shannon Troughton as her professional name.)

The press release announcing the creation of her VoxPop PR firm says that she began her career working for Gov. Carnahan in 1993. Missouri Democratic Gov. Carnahan, who served from 1993 to 2000, was vehemently anti-gun. In 1993, he endorsed repealing Missouri's preemption statute. At a gun control rally on March 20, 1994, Carnahan spoke, and also endorsed limiting handgun purchases to one per month, reporting all gun sales to the police, fingerprinting and

photographing gun purchasers, and requiring a permit to buy ammunition (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Mar. 21, 1994). From day one of his governorship, Carnahan worked hard to prevent the enactment of a Shall-Issue law for the licensed carrying of handguns for lawful protection. Carnahan was successful, thwarting carry reform throughout his governorship—Missouri's law was not enacted until 2002.

It's hard to imagine a public relations staffer for Gov. Carnahan not being involved in gun issues. Nevertheless, Watts claims to have had no involvement with the issue until Sandy Hook.

Watts recounts one event that led to her current activism: The day after the July 2012 murders in the Aurora, Colo., theater, her son went to watch the Batman movie. "He had a panic attack in the theater and had to leave. Here was my son, telling me he was sure the man next to him was holding a gun. He thought he was going to die" (*STIR Journal*, March 17, 2014).

Half a year later, the day after Sandy Hook, Watts started a Facebook site, "One Million Moms for Gun Control." Later, she changed the name to "Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America." The name change made sense. First of all, it must have become apparent at some point that the group was not going to get a million supporters. As of June 2014, the group has 186,970 "likes" on Facebook. As Facebook users know, a "like" can be a sign of strong engagement with a site, or it can be a very casual show of support, with the person who clicked "like" never even visiting the group's Facebook page.

The second part of the name change was to replace "Gun Control" with "Gun Sense." As an experienced public relations professional who started networking with the gun prohibition lobbies, Watts would have quickly learned that "gun control" has negative connotations for most Americans. That's why Handgun Control, Inc. changed its name to Brady Campaign in 2001.

After a while, Watts achieved the dream of every public relations professional—landing a fabulously

rich client. Her previous clients have included WellPoint, GE Healthcare and Monsanto, but these giant companies are poor cousins compared to Watts' current client. She landed the 16th-richest man in the world (according to *Forbes* magazine): Michael Bloomberg and his \$32 billion. Today, MDAG is part of Bloomberg's gun prohibition empire, which also includes his new "Everytown" organization and his anti-gun mayors group.

What's Bloomberg getting for his investment? Well, not much grassroots. MDAG has a lot of trouble getting attendance at its rallies. In fact, if you don't count the paid staff and the people who are getting free trips from Bloomberg, attendance at the rallies is tiny indeed.

On Twitter, MDAG has 24,100 followers, and the MDAG channel on YouTube has 650 subscribers. The various videos uploaded by MDAG typically have a few hundred viewers—with the notable exception of a video claiming that Facebook promotes illegal gun sales, which received more than 300,000 views.

In short, MDAG has the social media that can be bought when an ultra-rich client hires experienced public relations professionals, including professionals who have deep experience in social media, which Watts does—at least according to a press release for her VoxPop firm. But it sure isn't grassroots, although the willfully gullible media persist in portraying MDAG as an authentic social movement and Watts as a homemaker who just decided to do something about guns.

But the biggest falsehood about the Bloomberg/Watts organization is this: "Ms. Watts' goal is for Moms Demand Action to become the Mothers Against Drunk Driving of safe gun laws." Mothers Against Drunk Driving does not lobby for the prohibition of driving, of alcohol, of automobiles or even of getting drunk. In contrast, Watts is, like her employer, a prohibitionist.

She asserts that her group "is in no way anti-gun" and that it supports the Second Amendment. Yet Watts declares



SHE ASSERTS THAT HER GROUP "IS IN NO WAY ANTI-GUN" AND THAT IT SUPPORTS THE SECOND AMENDMENT. **YET WATTS DECLARES THAT SHE WANTS TO OUTLAW "ASSAULT WEAPONS," WHICH SHE DEFINES AS A GUN THAT "ENABLES HUMANS TO SHOOT 10 ROUNDS IN ONE MINUTE."**



that she wants to outlaw "assault weapons," which she defines as a gun that "enables humans to shoot 10 rounds in one minute" (Twitter, @shannonwatts, Nov. 1, 2013). In other words, everything except a muzzle-loading long gun is an "assault weapon" that must be prohibited.

Another tweet from her group stated: "FACT: There are 59,000 licensed gun dealers in the U.S., almost 5x the number of McDonalds franchises. #votegunsense" (Twitter, @MomsDemand, Aug. 2, 2013). But why would a person who supposedly is not against guns and supports the Second Amendment complain about there being too many licensed gun dealers?

As detailed in the July issue of this magazine, Bloomberg is not at all honest or accurate in the factual claims he makes about guns and gun laws. In this regard, Watts was a very compatible choice for Bloomberg to hire.

On June 7, she told CNN that "they don't allow guns ... even at the headquarters of the NRA." Of course this is false. The NRA Headquarters in Fairfax, Va., has a very good shooting range, and inside the headquarters building, staff and visitors carry guns in compliance with Virginia state law.

Unfortunately, Watts' audacious falsehood reached a large audience via CNN, few of whom would ever learn that she was not telling the truth.

On that same CNN program, the host challenged Watts with NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre's point that bad guys with guns are stopped by good guys with guns. Watts retorted, "This has never happened. Data shows it doesn't happen."

In truth, it happens every day in America. "The Armed Citizen" column, which appears in this magazine and the other NRA official journals, summarizes several of these incidents every month. The website gunssavelives.net also collects some of the armed self-defense stories that get reported in local news. (Most, incidentally, are never covered by the national media.)

If we're only talking about attempted mass murders, then my *Los Angeles Times*

op-ed from Jan. 15, 2013, identified 10 incidents in which a good guy with a gun thwarted a would-be mass killer. Some subsequent incidents where a good guy with a gun stopped an especially dangerous bad guy with a gun include: Price Middle School, Atlanta, Ga., Jan. 30, 2013 (school guard); Arapahoe High School, Colorado, Dec. 15, 2013 (school resource officer); Forsyth County Courthouse, Georgia, June 6, 2014 (sheriff's deputy).

Social scientists argue about the frequency of armed self-defense in the United States. The lowest estimates are about 100,000 times annually, with the highest estimate at 2.5 million times annually (based on a survey conducted by Professor Gary Kleck in the early 1990s). There are 12 other surveys that report a figure somewhere in-between.

Whatever the exact figure, the data does show that successful armed self-defense is frequent in the United States, and has sometimes stopped would-be mass killers. Yet Watts insists that it never happens.

Indeed, Watts, herself, obviously doesn't believe that good guys with guns never stop bad guys. At the small rally she held outside the NRA Annual Meetings & Exhibits in Indianapolis, Ind., in April, she was protected by armed bodyguards.

It is hypocritical, indeed, for Watts to employ the protection of Bloomberg-paid bodyguards while at the same time working to prevent self-defense by law-abiding Americans who cannot afford paid guards.

Watts describes pro-rights activists who disagree with her as "gun bullies." She has repeatedly and falsely claimed that pro-gun radio host Dana Loesch is a paid "shill" of the ammo magazine manufacturer MagPul. Long after that falsehood had been exposed, Watts repeated it during her unsuccessful campaign to prevent Loesch from appearing on the TV program "The View." Loesch continued to ask Watts for a retraction or proof, but Watts has refused.

When Watts' group held an anti-gun

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rally in Dallas last November, and another group held a counter-protest outside, Watts claimed to be worried that the pro-gun advocates would murder and rape the anti-gun advocates (National Review Online, Nov. 11, 2013). Besides the fact that this has never happened anywhere in 400 years of American pro-gun events, there's also the fact that the pro-rights protestors had brought along their wives and children.

Along with Bloomberg, Watts has distributed a great deal of plainly false propaganda. They claim that since Newtown, there have been 74 school shootings. This is only true if your definition of a "school shooting" is a crime that involved a knife, or that took place several blocks away from a school and had nothing to do with the school.

In fact, as we reported in last month's "First Things First" section, the list was so problematic that an investigation by CNN determined that only 20 percent of the incidents involved "a minor or

adult actively shooting inside or near a school." Even PolitiFact characterized the claimed total of 74 as "mostly false." Its analysis quotes a former member of the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit stating "[t]here is an ocean of difference" between what average people consider a school shooting and various episodes in the accounting.

Watts also purports to speak for all mothers. Last spring, as the Indiana legislature was passing a bill to allow persons with carry permits to possess firearms in automobiles on school parking lots, Watts testified, "Schools do not want firearms on their properties and neither do the mothers of Indiana" (WTHR News, Apr. 14).


Watts actually speaks only for a relatively small group of highly gullible people, including some mothers. But she did say something accurate: "When it comes to protecting our children, our families and our communities from gun violence—moms will never give up."

That is why tens of millions of American mothers, fathers and other law-abiding citizens have chosen to

exercise their Second Amendment-protected rights. They know that in the right hands, guns save lives.

A good example is Julie Golob, captain of Team Smith & Wesson and author of "I'm An NRA Mom" in our June issue. A mother of two, Golob is giving a voice to thousands of NRA Moms who aren't recognized by the national media.

"The truth is simple, and we all know it," Golob wrote. "Despite our opponents' attempts to vilify the National Rifle Association, the fact remains that the NRA is dedicated to safe, responsible firearm ownership. So steadfast is our organization that we produce and provide firearm safety materials, classes and organized shooting sports, as well as resources for schools and parents to educate children. We want Americans to respect firearms and make responsible choices about them, not simply fear them.

"Most of all, the NRA Mom stands up for freedom—and the Second Amendment rights that guarantee all of our other freedoms." 



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