

Kids, guns and the American way

In February, a nine-year-old Arkansas boy called Hank asked his uncle if he could head off on his own from their remote camp to hunt a rabbit with his .22 calibre rifle. “I said all right,” recalled his uncle Brent later. “It wasn’t a concern. Some people are like, ‘a nine year old shouldn’t be off by himself,’ but he wasn’t an average nine year old.”

Hank was steeped in hunting: when he was two, his father, Brad, would put him in a rucksack on his back when he went turkey hunting. Brad regularly took Hank hunting and said that his son often went off hunting by himself. On this particular day, Hank and his uncle Brent had gone squirrel hunting together as his father was too sick to go.

When Hank didn’t return from hunting the rabbit, his uncle raised the alarm. His mother, Kelli, didn’t learn about his disappearance for seven hours. “They didn’t want to bother me unduly,” she says.

The following morning, though, after police, family and hundreds of locals searched around the camp, Hank’s body was found by a creek (...). The cause of death was, according to the police, most likely a hunting accident.

“He slipped and the butt of the gun hit the ground and the gun fired,” says Kelli.

Kelli had recently bought the gun for Hank. “It was the first gun I had purchased for my son, just a youth .22 rifle. I never thought it would be a gun that would take his life.”

Both Kelli and Brad, from whom she is separated, believe that the gun was faulty – it shouldn’t have gone off unless the trigger was pulled, they claim. Since Hank’s death, she’s been posting warnings on her Facebook page about the gun her son used: “I wish someone else had posted warnings about it before what happened,” she says. (...)

Kelli has a fond memory of her son coming home with what he’d shot. “He’d come in and say: “Momma – I’ve got some squirrel to cook.” And I’d say ‘Gee, thanks.’ That child was happy to bring home meat. He was the happiest child when he came in from shooting.”

But Hank’s story is also striking because it shows how raising kids to hunt and shoot is seen as good parenting, perhaps even as an essential part of bringing up children in America – a society rife with guns and temperamentally incapable of overturning the second amendment that confers the right to bear arms, no matter how many innocent Americans die or get maimed as a result.

“People know I was a good mother and loved him dearly,” says Kelli. (...)

Does Kelli regret that Hank was allowed to hunt alone at that young age? “Obviously I do, because I’ve lost my son,” she tells me. But she doesn’t blame Brent for letting him go off from camp unsupervised with a gun.

“We’re sure not anti-gun here, but do I wish I could go back in time and not buy that gun? Yes I do. I know you in England don’t have guns. I wish I could go back and have my son back. I would live in England, away from the guns.”