

Trans Activist Teaches Self-defense

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Gun sales increased rapidly in 2020 with an unprecedented amount of new gun owners walking out of stores with firearms, many of them with no prior experience handling or operating any sort of firearm. I met with a local firearms instructor to discuss how she has been working to counteract this trend. We met at a gun range about 45 minutes from Charlottesville, where she had been teaching a concealed carry class, and sat down at a picnic bench for our interview.



Clara Elliot and student on the firing line. Photo courtesy of Clara Elliot

“I remember one particular time going into a gun store at the height of the [Black Lives Matter (BLM)] protests, and there were a lot of African-Americans, and there were a lot of white folks in there, and you could feel the tension. That’s when I realized that a lot of people are very uncomfortable around ‘gun culture,’” said Clara Elliot, founder of ATW Firearms Instruction, “Often times when you think of gun culture, you think of the far right, y’know, people who are racist, sexist, homophobic; extremely nasty bigotted people. I realized that people needed a place where they could feel comfortable learning about firearms, in training to use them safely.”

So she took a National Rifle Association (NRA) instructor course and started ATW Firearms Instruction in Oct. 2020. “Unfortunately, that class was a perfect example of why I was becoming an instructor. The entire class was nothing but cops, and they made bigoted jokes about LGBT people, African Americans, POCs (people of color), Muslims, Latinos; and I was literally in fear the entire class. I had just had

voice surgery and thankfully they couldn’t tell I was trans, because I was afraid, in all honesty, of what would happen if they did,” said Elliot.

Since founding her LLC (Limited Liability Corporation), she has provided training for more than 60 people in Virginia and gained over 1,300 followers on Instagram. “Starting [ATW Firearms Instruction] has been a learning experience, but I’ve found amazing people who share the mindset, a great community of leftist, POC, and female gun folks and instructors that I’ve been introduced to,” said Elliot.

“One of the things from the beginning of ATW was that it was about building a community for LGBTQ+ [people], building a community is so important and especially in the aftermath of 2020,” said Elliot, “Currently besides teaching this class, I’ve been making and handing out free self-defense kits for local trans and non-binary people. It’s been great for helping them have more access to self-defense and feel a little safer as well.”

Elliot said, “This is a passion project for me, and I’ve seen the impact that it’s had for people. They’re happy to have a place to come learn self-defense, because they’ve wanted to, but they’ve never had a safe way to do that. The NRA is not the end all and be all of training organizations, but I’m an NRA instructor. As a friend of mine put it, use rocks to break rocks, which is a good analogy of what I’m doing. I’m trying to do my part to break down these stereotypes of gun culture, so in the future I want to expand out from helping a few people a month to get their concealed carry permit, to being able to teach future instructors, so they can go out into their communities and do the same thing I’m trying to do.”



Clara Elliot, founder of ATW Firearms Instruction. Photo courtesy of Clara Elliot