



Conversations on Compassion podcast RAW Tools: Guns to Garden Tools with Mike Martin Transcript

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Music

Leslie Langbert: Welcome to *Conversations on Compassion*. I'm Leslie Langbert. Today, my guest is Mike Martin, the founder and executive director of the nonprofit organization RAW Tools. RAW Tools has a really inspiring mission; RAW Tools transforms guns into garden tools. And we are all very painfully aware every day in the United States, of at least one mass shooting that's happening. So this conversation actually is one that is life-affirming, and I think hopeful and inspiring, but I also want to encourage you to take care while listening. Enjoy the conversation.

Music

Leslie Langbert: Welcome Mike! Thanks for joining us today.

Mike Martin: Great to be with you.

Leslie Langbert: Yeah, I'm so, so glad that I recently learned about you and your work with RAW Tools, and I think that our listeners today as well, are going to be really intrigued. Mike, tell me a little bit about you and what led you to feel called to develop RAW Tools.

Mike Martin: So, I'm a former youth and young adult pastor, and part of my faith was the 'swords to plowshares' scripture and that's really what RAW Tools grows out of - the idea of taking something that is used to cause harm and turning it into something that is used to heal and feed, and really cultivate life and to do that in a modern context.

So, as I was starting the organization after I was a pastor, I also got connected to restorative justice practices and heard the story of a mother in Denver - I'm in Colorado Springs- who lost her three-year-old son in a drive by shooting.

So it was...they didn't intentionally try to kill him, but it was a product of the shooting and she was the first person in Colorado to go through what is now called 'high-impact dialogue' where you use a restorative justice process with someone who created significant harm to someone else like gun violence.

And so, she eventually, 17 years later sat down and talked to the person who was determined to be the shooter, the person who was the driver, there were three teens, all 16 years old or younger, so there was a huge, I don't know...motivation to try and facilitate space and work towards a world that looks like -her name is Charletta Evans- and her story, and less like the mass shootings that we're starting to see,

the increase in gun violence that we're seeing at all different kinds of intersections whether it's suicide or domestic violence or street violence, police violence.

All those things, they don't have like a magic button to fix them and there's a lot of great organizations out there, working in advocacy figuring out different policies, ways we can better organize our government systems to decrease gun violence, but it felt like there was a vacuum of what to do with all the trauma that gun violence causes.

And so, as we started turning guns into garden tools, we invited people who were impacted by gun violence into that process and that's when everything changed for me.

Because we kept being told that it was the first time they dealt with their anger from their grief in a healthy way, as opposed to hurting themselves, or hurting others, you know, like throwing something against the wall.

That kind of needing to physiologically release energy from trauma. When you can channel that into a hammer onto a gun barrel, that represents something that caused you so much harm, while simultaneously creating something that gives life, that really is where we derive a lot of our work. We are informed a lot by survivors and victims of gun violence in the work that we do.

Leslie Langbert: Yeah, there's clearly such a deep trust that you've earned in the community and your background as a youth pastor and really being motivated or called through your own spiritual background is a really powerful part of your story. You trained to become a blacksmith?

Mike Martin: Yeah, I didn't know how to blacksmith before. That was one of the kind of 'paralysis by analysis' spaces we got stuck in. We knew we wanted to do it, but we didn't know how. My dad and I learned how to do it together through a friend, or a business acquaintance of his that worked on some heavy equipment at his business who happened to grow up as a blacksmith, and so we went to his shop.

We said 'hey we have this gun barrel, we want to make a garden tool out of it', and we did it in a few hours, and all of a sudden, it became so accessible... a lot less complicated than I was imagining.

Which is really... everything kind of hinges on that. That it's so accessible. So, when we do events like a buyback we have eight to 10 saws set up and volunteers from the community helping us cut up those guns, or we have volunteers that regularly show up at our shop, to help us make tools.

Some of them are affected by gun violence and some not; some just wanting to do something with their hands to create a better world because they're sick of writing letters to elected representatives that aren't listening to them, depending on where they live, or you know just having that other thing to do with their hands to effect positive change is really valuable to a lot of our volunteers and the people we interact with.

Music break



Leslie Langbert: I really like to think of this as...it's ceremony, right? That is happening in community...the world that we want to live in looks different and we're not only reimagining it but right now we're actively creating it.

Mike Martin: Yeah, a hundred percent. I think the idea of ceremony and ritual really kind of awakens the community to realize the trauma that gun violence is causing on their neighbors. And that's a positive thing that from the events that we have.

When we do that gun-to- garden- tool demonstration, to hear from people who've been impacted by gun violence and then invite them and those present, to take a turn with the hammer and it seems to provide a wake-up call. Whether they want to get involved with our organization or other organizations in their community, we hope to spark that kind of innermost motivation that says 'this can't go on like this'.

Leslie Langbert: Mm hmm. As you know, my siblings and I inherited a couple of firearms. It was like, 'okay well, what do we do with these'? And, of course, one of the options was well, we can call the local police department and dispose of them that way, but something just kind of didn't really...that didn't entirely feel like the right thing. So, when I heard Bronte Velez talking about Lead to Life I was like *this*, this is it, this is the transformation of the energy that that we're looking for.

So I'm mentioning this now and we'll come back to this in the conversation because I'm hopeful that there are people listening to this that are like, 'oh wow yeah, actually in a closet somewhere...' you know, or if there's a situation where there's a firearm in someone's possession that they've inherited through a trauma, that there is a pathway of healing with that.

But I want to talk about some of the ways in which RAW Tools and the community are coming together. I just saw on Instagram recently that you all did a demonstration with a bunch of kids in a community that just seemed really powerful. Would you like to share a little bit about that?

Mike Martin: Yeah, we often like to involve people of all ages in the process of turning a gun into a garden tool. But this one in particular in Colorado springs, one of the suburbs is Manitou Springs, and they have a space there called Flying Pig Farm and every year they do summer camps for kids and we usually team up with them on one of those days.

And so we had, I believe it was, like third or fourth grade through middle school age kids and throughout the morning we'd rotate groups through and each kid would get a chance to pick up the hammer and make something out of it, but also we'd have the conversations about gun violence, about conflict resolution skills.

In this particular area they're actually...their city as a whole is exploring trauma informed communities so they're exploring stuff in this community that isn't common in a lot of other spaces.

Which also means that all of their elementary schools and middle and well.. all their K through 12 public schools already have restorative practices as a model within their school. So, dialogue circles, you know, every day starts with you know, like a teacher saying 'let's circle up' or 'let's do circle time'. Something

around that where they'll process what's going to happen that day, maybe issues they had the last evening with homework or a friend, or whatever, that is.

It was great, you know, talking to them about that and contrasting that to kind of this illusion of how guns solve problems for us whether they're turned on ourselves or others. One of the kids, talking about restorative practices, said something you know, like 'you should teach this to adults!'

There's this change that's happening with younger generations, and I think it might be because they've kind of grown up in this active shooter drills space that...I was a junior or sophomore - junior in high school when Columbine happened. So a lot of that stuff happened... all those drills, I never really...I'm almost 40 so it'd be you know the generation younger than me.

And they've really kind of, this has just been a normalcy; a part of their life that they don't want to accept anymore. And I think that it's not just developing these conflict resolution skills, but also recognizing that they don't need to own guns to solve their problems. They don't need to use violence. If they're not going to use a gun to solve problems, that they're actively practicing these dialogue skills, not just to have healthy conversations, but that when conflict happens they already have a model to work that out with.

Music break

Mike Martin: And I think that connects to, you know, inheriting firearms that we are constantly having an opportunity to change cycles within our family, within our community, and one of those I believe is the need or want to have gun ownership.

You know in the next 40 years people are going to be inheriting hundreds of millions of firearms and they have to choose what they do with that.

Sometimes that comes after a tragedy like suicide, because often those firearms are returned to the family as their property and so a lot of the donations we accept are in that circumstance, and so there's often pastoral or mental health care available and we make sure to have connections to those resources when we know that that's the context of the donation we're about to receive.

So, yeah it's such a fun time to be able to be in that like community garden space like Flying Pig Farm working with kids and that gives me so much hope to know that those kids have a totally different viewpoint on life than the people 20 -30 years older than them.

Leslie Langbert: Yeah. I'm so appreciating the way that we're talking about too, how RAW Tools is about so much more than just...which is so powerful in and of itself...that firearms are being melted down and repurposed into garden tools, but really talking about such a holistic model. And we're also talking about conflict resolution skills and we're talking about how do we cultivate a deeper sense of interconnectedness and interbeing and reverence for the natural world and the earth and things that grow! It's really shifting perspective from destruction to creativity.

Mike Martin: Mm Hmm.

Leslie Langbert: Does RAW Tools actually have a curriculum or offerings or programs that folks can access? If someone is a teacher, or if they are in a youth program and they're really interested in wanting to work with either students or young people that are in their care? Are there resources that they can access from RAW Tools in their community and how might they go about doing that?

Mike Martin: We've got a few resources, one is the book I co-wrote, they are all faith-based, part of that is because Christians are one of the largest voting blocks in the country. If we can... kind of like how Gandhi said 'I like Christ, but I'm not so sure about the Christians or about his followers', that if we could hold ourselves more accountable to this crisis.

We have a resource called 'Loaded Conversations' that just helps communities of faith talk about gun violence and then there's another one called 'Fear Not' that helps institutional spaces develop how to respond to acts of violence.

So you can think 'active shooter' but really that's not as common as other forms of violence that might show up in institutional spaces. How do we respond to those without responding in-kind? And so it's really trying to find a way to be a hospitable space, as opposed to kind of the narrative of hardening our schools, where the more you harden them, the less of kind of like a learning atmosphere it becomes. Not that you're going to be totally naive about the possibilities of acts of violence happening in your space, but that you're going to make an intentional effort to think outside the box to respond in ways that will cultivate imagination, will still be able to respond in a healthy and active way to a form of active violence and that doesn't just go to kind of like the 'what if?' that imagines the worst possible scenario for you, but also, after.

So that kind of trauma informed space, if something happens in our space, how are we going to heal from it? That's part of this too, not just how are we going to stop it, but how are we going to heal from it? And are we active enough in our communities to provide the resources that people need so they don't feel like they have to grab a gun? Do we have equal access to health care, food, equitable wages those kinds of things? All of those, especially when you talk about suicide, people talk about kind of different pillars that one, two or three of those falls and that puts someone more at risk for attempting. If we can make sure that our communities have those pillars, but also that they're equally accessible by the people in the community, then rates of violence go down.

And then the other one we have is the book 'Beating Guns' that I co-wrote. That really is just trying to spark a new imaginative response to this crisis.

Beyond that there's a lot of other things like the Be SMART campaign that Moms Demand Action puts out. That talks about when your kids have play dates at another person's house you ask the parents 'do you have firearms? and if you do, are they locked up? If they're not then the kids can come play at our house' kind of space. So just open, blunt conversations as simple as that.

You can find those through Google search or RAW Tools or feel free to reach out to us.

Music break



Leslie Langbert: Mike let's take a moment just to kind of shift into how you're feeling in this time and with all of the really positive impact that you're making... *and*...there's also so much that's alive in the field in terms of growing inequity, what feels like increasing violence, so many challenges. What helps to sustain you? How do you replenish, recharge? And how do you find self-care?

Mike Martin: Well, there was especially after Buffalo and Uvalde and Tulsa, there's kind of this moment that you always question like, 'is this even making a difference'? kind of thing, and I think I have to continually remind myself, that this is a slow growth. That destruction is always easier and quicker than creation.

So really for me, it's getting out into creation, one of the things I did in COVID was, I got a kayak and that has helped me.

Last week our family went camping. So a lot of family time out in the outdoors is something that really helps kind of replenish me. I think I'm an extroverted introvert so I do like to be around people, but I need a lot of recovery time when I do that so that's I think just getting outdoors.

I'm lucky that I'm in Colorado at the base of Pike's Peak in the foothills out here so it's a space that helps me heal a little bit or helps me build back the energy to start the next day.

Leslie Langbert: Yeah, that's awesome. Yeah that connection in the natural world it's definitely a really powerful one for me too. I appreciate that so much living here in Tucson that there's always an opportunity to get out and go into the mountains to reconnect and kind of put it all back into perspective.

And so, I'm sensing into the courage that it takes for you to have created this organization and for you to be doing this work. Do you want to speak to that a little bit in terms of have you been met with challenges, either from individuals...have you received pushback? Either on a larger, like state sanctioned level at all? Has there been or what kind of push back do you see to the work that you're doing?

Mike Martin: I was certainly, I think paranoid, is the right word, when we started RAW Tools, because when you file, even just the papers to start an organization, you have to include someone's home address, so we thought through, you know what did we... did we want to put down our home address? One of our founding board members has been an active peacemaking protester in the Colorado Springs area for years and they were quick to offer theirs and so that helped me out a little bit.

But we found that most of the criticism lies with the people who are donating the firearms. So it seems that RAW Tools, even from the very beginning was kind of this unchangeable organization, right? We have this mission and vision- that's what we do so, it didn't, for whatever reason, it feels like, people who would want to troll or, and I mean like in person, not necessarily online comments - those are just going to be there all the time, but that the people...

For instance, the person who donated the first firearm to us, he wanted to make it public. It was two and a half months after Sandy Hook, he had an AK-47 that he didn't want his grandkids to get ahold of,



and so we cut it up. He invited the press there, and he was the one who received all the vitriol from the community, not us. We weren't even a mention.

I also think part of that is people don't want to legitimize what we do, the people who don't like what we do so, they try and focus on the person. We have had zero protests at any events that we've done and that includes like a 37-city book tour where a gun was getting...or multiple guns were getting cut up at every single site, and it was well publicized, so it wasn't like people don't know where we're at.

There were some concerns with churches, when we started doing buybacks with them without law enforcement and those events actually looked more like a church carwash than it did, like a gun buyback and that was really uplifting. They had welcoming signs, they rang bells when an assault-style weapon was turned in, you know, there was just this totally different atmosphere.

That church did receive some calls and some nasty emails but nothing came of it, and so I think that that is out there. We've done an event in Louisville one year, that happens the same time, every year in the same city, but that year, the theme was 'Pathways to Non-Violence', and it also happened to be the same time and week that the NRA Convention was in town.

And so usually, the Festival of Faiths is what it was called, will kind of buy all the advertising all through downtown so all the street signs and stuff like that would be for them. But because of the power of the NRA, they had to give up half of it. So, on one side of the street, you had these 'Pathways to Non-Violence' signs and advertising, on the other side of the street, you had all the NRA signs and advertising. So it really was... it felt like everywhere you went it was like this fork in the road like, 'which direction am I going to choose?'

We were downtown but their convention was out by the airport, but we were down by like Louisville BAT Museum and a lot of other tourist spaces, some of the concerts that they were having downtown and so people would walk by where we were set up and wonder what we're doing.

The anvil is kind of this...I don't know it just beckons people to come watch, and they would come over and ask what we're doing and so we'd have mostly civil conversations with most of the people that would stay and talk, most people would just shake their heads and walk off.

And really I think you know there's this... if people are in a space that just is disagreeable to you they're not going to talk to you unless you have a relationship with them. So, I found most of my active conversations with people who disagree with me are people who I already have a relationship with.

That it's hard to kind of have those conversations unless you have that relationship and unless you're going to commit to keep having those conversations. So yeah, I think there's definitely that push back out there, but it's nothing like what I what I was imagining in my head.

Leslie Langbert: Yeah, that's really encouraging to hear and, it points to, I think, for me, that there definitely are more people that are that are in support of, and I think probably also looking for options to be able to dispose of firearms in a transformative way and in a safe way.

I want to talk a little bit about the RAW Tools network and I want to say too, you know, coming back to the really thoughtful way that you have established every step of this to be really deeply trauma informed and also safe.

On the website there's a form that you can complete that's thorough, and it was so thoughtful in terms of, 'do you need additional resources?' and a way of care and support around this, and 'was there a traumatic event related to this particular donation?'

It felt really important to us to really kind of help to transform some of the energy in that part of the (ancestral) line and so when I reached out to you and I was like 'well I'm in Tucson, the weapons are in Florida, and so...how do I do this?'

And it was so wonderful the way that you put me in touch with someone who lives in the area in Florida, who was an absolute delight. I'm not going to name him fully ,but shout out to Chris if he's listening to this... I still have so much appreciation for you and your kindness and welcoming me into your home, while you took care of cutting up the weapons that I brought to you.

And yeah, it was just it was the way that you facilitated it, you know, like I'm like Okay, I have no idea who this person is in the network... like where, am I going? and everything about it was just wonderful.

That you said, 'keep me in the in the email conversation when you get it scheduled' and you know all of that. So I'm sharing all this, I'm rambling on because I want people to be aware that if you're not living in Colorado Springs, if you're not living in a community where there is a ceremony, where there is a demonstration, that there is a really beautiful network.

Do you want to share about that, about the RAW Tools network?

Mike Martin: Yeah, so all of this just kind of gradually grew where we'd start, we just go somewhere and turn a gun into a garden tool and whoever is hosting us, which is also, I think, a reason why we haven't had protests is because usually we partner with churches that are a positive influence in their community. So someone can't protest us without also going against something in the community that is a positive asset.

We built this... you know we do an event and somebody's like 'hey can we keep doing this here?' it's like 'yeah, maybe we'll leave this saw with you', or 'if you have access to funds, you can get a saw and the equipment you need to cut this up'.

And so it has slowly built from there. We did the book tour in 2019 about a year before the pandemic, and really, out of those 37 cities, probably two-thirds of them are now people who help us in our network, so we have almost 100 volunteers in our network now.

The map on our website is woefully out of date. There have just been so many new people I haven't had time to add the little marks on the map there but most volunteers in that or the people who are donating a firearm will drive. You know they'll spend a day if they need to, just because they know that they're going to be destroyed at the end of it and it's not just something they're dropping off with law

enforcement or reselling and putting back in the market. And that's really valuable to have and to know that it's going to get cut up in front of you.

Oftentimes it's been partners with faith spaces, or people who are connected to community organizations who do this who may not be comfortable advertising themselves, but they want to be part of a national network, so if someone in their area wants to donate a firearm, I connect them to the closest volunteer in that area.

We have the least amount of volunteers now through the South, the Bible belt area. But if there isn't someone on the map, you can still contact us, because we have connections in a lot of places that we try and nourish and ask and just kind of put the ball in their court and say 'hey do you want to start cutting up guns for us?' Is this something your church or your organization wants to do with us on a regular basis?

And then that kind of trauma informed piece- we just want to make sure that we're present with folks as this happens and that if they need access to other things. I don't necessarily have, like, a resource for each of the 100 volunteers to connect with, but they probably do. And it really is a good exercise that if this happens and that volunteer isn't aware, then they do the homework and they start to be aware, and it really is a great motivator to say 'hey, where are these resources?' or 'why aren't there any on this side of town?', why is it only on the other side of the tracks kind of space.

It's really not just become this network of people who want to help cut up firearms, but a network of people who want to look into the resources to make their communities better because of the connection that it has to gun violence.

Music break

Leslie Langbert: I want to bring us back to around to the life affirming and creative energy and the transformation into the tools. I'd love to hear more about some of the farms and community gardens where your tools are now in use.

Mike Martin: Yeah, so actually I don't have many connections to where they all are because they're usually in partnership with places that hosted us. So, like one in Toledo we had, it was an interfaith space that had a community garden that grew fresh food for an elementary school next door, and so it looks a lot like that.

We also... I mean my church has a community garden, and we had RAW Tools there, but it is certainly a kind of a goal of ours to start outfitting community gardens or co-ops with our tools, so that you can start measuring this is how many pounds of food these tools grew this year, instead of this is how many lives that these guns took. That's the outcomes that we want to start to move towards and encourage. Those are already happening we're just not measuring them.

But we are taking hold of the relationships that those build. Like Flying Pig Farm got the tool we made, it stayed there. Wherever we do events, the tool stays there. They're made from guns in their communities, and it really is important to connect that.



We're doing eight buybacks this year with Denver and Aurora- the biggest metro areas in Colorado. And we've already gotten 600 firearms and there's three more buybacks left. We'll probably get right around 1000, and all those pieces and parts are kind of our payment because we'll make tools and sell them but we're also going to be donating a lot of those tools to green spaces in the area. And hopefully employing youth and young adults to help make them. So there's all different intersections of this, or not necessarily intersections, but places where you can intersect the process with community involvement.

One of the great things is there's more and more studies coming out that when you green a space in a neglected area of a city or town -doesn't matter what it is- violence decreases by at least 30%.

So there is this tangible effect that removing firearms, we know that also decreases firearm violence, but then repurposing them into something that will green a space will also decrease violence of all kinds in a community. So being able to care for a space - that's largely where that decrease comes from. You have a neglected neighborhood that doesn't feel like anyone cares for them, and all of a sudden there's resources dedicated to that neighborhood to create a positive space.

Then, when you feel cared for you act differently, and I think that's the biggest connection in these community gardens and community spaces- is to say, we don't want guns, because we care about each other, and we don't want to be put in situations where we're going to be, should be, pointing them at each other. We'd rather be pointing these tools into the ground and cultivating food and relationships that make our communities better.

There's a lot of places that have our tools. Community gardens that use them and they get to tell that story. And it's just one of those great moments that you get to have with a neighbor who's at a community garden in a bed next to you, and you have a tool that looks nothing like anybody else's tools so they're going to ask you 'What is that? Where did you get that? Looks like a good tool.' And then it goes from there.

Leslie Langbert: Awesome. Just absolutely amazing... inspiring. So Mike as we get ready to let you go here, what else, what would you like to share? Anything else?

Mike Martin: Well, we do have...one of our board members is in Tucson and they just started with another therapist friend of theirs something called the Raiz Collective. I don't know, my guess is it's not out too much in the public, yet, but we're their fiscal sponsor and they provide mental health care to at-risk populations, especially LGBTQ folks and people who identify as belonging to a marginalized community. They got some grant funding from the local food bank there, so if people want to connect there, we also have an active person who helps disable guns there in Tucson. I think I might have mentioned that when you started reaching out but, since it was kind of managing a state in another state that didn't work out but, they do stuff around affordable housing and affordable upkeep for people who can't afford to keep up their houses so there's definitely places in Tucson that we can connect you with if people want to connect with RAW Tools directly.

And just because we have someone in Tucson already cutting up guns doesn't mean other people in Tucson can't do it, too, because the quicker, we can do it the better and our volunteers aren't always available right away, especially in the summers when everyone's traveling.

If people want to get more involved feel free to reach out on our website at RAW Tools dot org, you can follow us on Facebook, Twitter and social media and Instagram and that's where we often put our upcoming events, things are happening., like what we did at Flying Pig Farm.

You can sign up for our newsletter, that's where we announce when our tools are for sale. There's going to be another batch coming in the next week or two - we usually try and do about two dozen a month, it doesn't always happen that way, but once we announce it in our newsletter they're usually sold out within a few hours.

That's the best way to know when. It looks like we're always out of stock but that's not true, we do update it, they just sell really, really quickly once we put it on there. And there's other kind of, you know, like, I don't know...traditional swag you can get there, too, but yeah we would love... we're very grassroots oriented and community minded and would love to connect with people if they want to get involved.

Leslie Langbert: Awesome. Thank you so much, Mike.

Mike Martin: Thanks for having me, Leslie.

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Leslie Langbert: Thanks for listening. Conversations on Compassion is produced by me, Leslie Langbert, and the University of Arizona College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Center for Compassion Studies. Our engineer is Gary Darnell, with the University Center for Assessment, Teaching and Learning. To learn more about the Center for Compassion Studies, visit our website at [compassioncenter dot arizona dot edu](http://compassioncenter.arizona.edu), or follow us on Instagram at [ua_compassioncenter](https://www.instagram.com/ua_compassioncenter).

Music outro

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