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Shirley Lochowitz accompanies her son, Nick, to the ambulance.

By Shirley Lochowitz

As I sat on the hard, plastic chair in the intensive-care unit, I looked at my 12-year-old son, Nick, lying in the hospital bed. His face was swollen badly from all the fluids being pumped into his body to replace the large amount of blood—more than a quart—he had lost.

He had come out of surgery just a few hours earlier, with the surgeon giving him only a 50-percent chance of living. I kept looking back to the monitors that told me he was alive. I prayed for each beep on the machines and watched every breath he took, then began asking myself, “How could this have happened?”

After dropping Nick at the babysitter’s house the afternoon of Aug. 10, 1995, I had gone to my job as a Caledonia, Wisc. police officer. I was wearing my bulletproof vest as usual. Before the day was over, though, I would be wishing my son had worn the vest.

I was at the police department, assisting another officer on a drunk-driving arrest, when a shooting call came in. Because it was in my assigned area for the day, I told the dispatcher I would respond. On the way to the call, I asked the dispatcher for the address and more details.

She told me a 14-year-old had shot a 12-

year-old. When she gave me the address, it sounded familiar, but I didn’t know why. I then asked for the last name. My heart sank when I heard her reply—it was the last name of my son’s friend.

My son earlier had asked if he could visit his 14-year-old friend while I was at work. The boy lived right around the corner from the babysitter’s home. I had said it was OK, as long as the babysitter knew where he would be.

“I hope it’s not my son” is all I could say to the dispatcher, who asked what my location was.

When I was only blocks away from the home, the dispatcher came back and said, “It’s Nick.”

The first to arrive, I ran to the house, crying out my son’s name... “Nick, Nick, where are you?” As soon as I entered the back door, I saw him—he was propped against the basement doorframe.

“Mom, I’m OK,” he said, but I knew differently. My son was not OK; he was dying in front of me. He was sweating profusely, and his skin was ashen gray.

I heard the rescue squad pull up and ran outside to meet them, yelling, “Please, please, please hurry—it’s my son!” They looked at me strangely, evidently not understanding why I was acting this way. They rushed Nick to the hospital, where he

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underwent 4.5 hours of emergency surgery, including six resections of his intestines and numerous repairs to his stomach lining.

What led to this near-death experience? Nick's 14-year-old friend had been playing with a loaded .22-caliber rifle, which his dad allowed him to keep under his bed. The father, an attorney in our area, said he let his son keep the loaded rifle under his bed because he thought "nothing would happen." That kind of thinking, coupled with the fact the 14-year-old didn't follow the rules he had learned at hunter-safety class, nearly cost my son his life.

Because of what happened, I walked away from nearly 14 years of police work and have dedicated my days to sharing our story and why safe gun storage is so vital. I tell my story to anyone who will listen. After years of dreaming about a video that would help me reach many more people than I ever could do on my own, I found an interested production company in 2002. "The Other End of the Barrel" video recreates the day of my son's shooting and includes a message about safe gun storage.

My son's shooting was preventable; it didn't have to happen. My job is to prevent it from happening to another family. ■

The author tells me that Nick, now 20, has undergone three more surgeries since the original one. "People need to know incidents like these bring lifelong health problems," she said.

Thanks to Shirley Lochowitz and to Curt Kindschuh, president of Drunk Busters of America, L.L.C., for making this story available. For more information about Drunk Busters of America or to order a copy of "The Other End of the Barrel" video, visit the Drunk Busters website at www.drunkbusters.com. The author invites you also to visit her website at www.otherendofthebarrel.org.—Ed.

Here's a good reason to keep your gun cabinet locked and to store the key out of your child's reach.

