

## A mindful solution to combating gun violence

By **DIRECTOR X AND JAY ROSENZWEIG**  
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JIM YOUNG: GETTY IMAGES

Protestors chant during the March for Our Lives rally on March 24 in Chicago. More than 800 March for Our Lives events, organized by survivors of the Parkland, Fla. school shooting on Feb. 14 that left 17 dead, took place around the world to call for legislative action to address school safety and gun violence.

We're two Toronto guys who care a great deal about eradicating gun violence. One of us — the one who is an internationally acclaimed film and music video director — speaks from personal knowledge, having been wounded during a New Year's Eve shooting in 2015.

We both know violence is not exclusive to any race or class. There are people from all walks of life who act out violently when their emotions get the best of them. Getting a handle on violence, and gun violence specifically, requires a major multi-faceted, multidisciplinary effort that addresses mental illness, poverty, societal strains and the rising tide of hateful, divisive communication.

The evidence is everywhere. The horrific mass shooting last week at the Thousand Oaks, Calif., bar, where a gunman murdered 12 people. The Pittsburgh synagogue shooting about a week before that, where 11 people were murdered in a particularly heinous hate crime.

But tragically there is some kind of mass shooting pretty much every day. There are so many shootings that only the most terrifying or sensational cases make the news. Canada is not immune, as we have seen coming off the summer of the gun. The Government of Canada is looking into additional policies, regulations or legislation that could reduce gun violence.

We didn't know each other when a bullet ripped through two other men before lodging in Director X's hip. The artist, who has directed big-budget videos for Drake, Usher, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Iggy Azalea and a host of other A-listers, was angry that he had become collateral damage in a club shooting.

Then he became introspective. He looked at the hip hop scene, saw a wildly popular art form that celebrates gun violence, and began speaking out against that violence.

But Director X doesn't believe hip hop is the root cause, nor does he advocate for banning or censoring the music, though he would like to see hip hop artists express their bravado without gunplay imagery. The reality is, as much as we would like to see much less violent imagery in music, we know that is unlikely to change. Another approach must be taken.

One critical element of that new approach is a greater focus on mental health, and the way our brains deal with the aggravations, slights and frustrations of our daily lives. At the heart of it, we have to heal the damaged human minds that channel frustrations and rage through the barrel of a gun.

After he was wounded, Director X began trying to understand an individual's decision to use violence and where that decision happens — in the brain. Studies have found that the brains of those who lash out violently often have damage

in the prefrontal cortex (where decisions are made) and in the amygdala (where emotions are regulated.) This damage can stem from childhood trauma. Researchers have found damage to the prefrontal cortex and amygdala in the brains of children who have been abused or neglected.

The good news is that this damage does not have to be permanent. Much peer-reviewed research demonstrates that the simple practice of mindfulness meditation can change physical and brain structures, including better management of stress hormones, an increase in grey matter in the prefrontal cortex and a smaller, calmer Amygdala — the damaged brain areas associated with increased likelihood of violence.

Teaching children to meditate before they fall prey to violent tendencies can play an important role in this multi-faceted approach. Like physical fitness for the mind. When a San Francisco middle school adopted a meditation program, it had just come off a year with 38 killings in the neighbourhood. Gang violence was pervasive and the children were anxiety-ridden, with schoolyard fights breaking out every day. One day, three bodies were dumped in the schoolyard.

Soon after the meditation program was introduced, teachers saw a change in behaviour. Suspensions, fights and absenteeism dropped dramatically. Student performance improved, and since the program was instituted, the school was rated the happiest in the San Francisco school district.

Similarly, in one of Mexico's most violent prisons — where one riot saw 44 men killed — a meditation program was implemented for the 700 prisoners and prison staff. Since then, there have been no cases of extreme violence.

Education is clearly a big part of the solution. Likewise, parents and neighbourhoods, police, business people, mental health professionals, influencers in the entertainment and sports fields, and certainly political leaders all have important roles to play.

The fact that the two of us — a filmmaker and a businessman — have committed to working together to find solutions is proof a multidisciplinary approach can work. We met in Los Angeles as part of a delegation led by Mayor John Tory to promote Toronto to the U.S. entertainment industry.

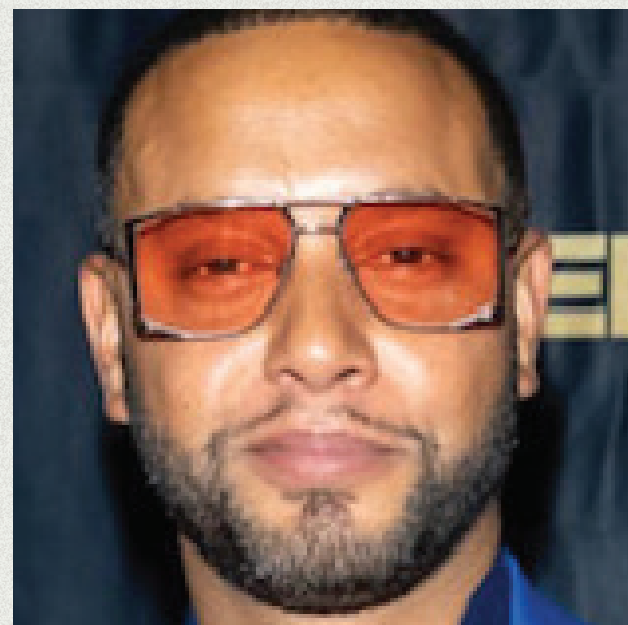
In our first show of solidarity, we came together at Winston House in L.A. in support of March for Our Lives, the student-led march for tighter gun control that took place in the wake of the Feb. 14, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School murders in Parkland, Fla.

A Winston House program, called Spark The March, leveraged the influence of artists such as Selena Gomez, Taylor Swift, Camila

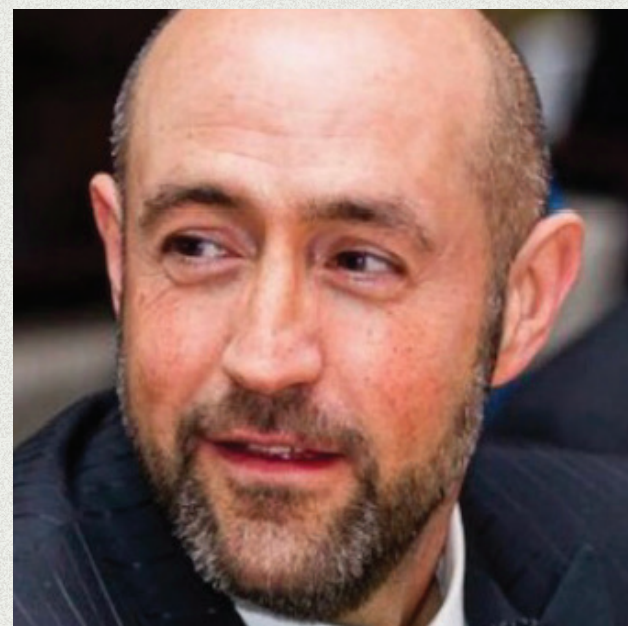
Cabello, Shawn Mendes, Snoop Dogg, ASAP Ferg, Pearl Jam, Maroon 5, Julia Michaels, Grace Vanderwaal, Pharrell and many others to encourage the masses to get out and march. It was a highly effective program, which we look forward to replicating for future causes.

Director X has met with Mayor Tory to discuss the problem of gun violence and has offered to play a role in helping to solve the problem. Hopefully, we are at the early beginnings of a coalition between government, mental health professionals, business and the arts.

We encourage more to join us to create something that we've never seen before: a committed, cross-sector, cross-cultural movement to eradicate gun violence by facing it down from every corner of our community.



Director X, a.k.a. Julien Christian Lutz, is an internationally recognized filmmaker and director



Jay Rosenzweig is an expert in building leadership teams and scaling businesses and is a passionate advocate for human rights.