

Business

Borrowing strategy from NRA, activists quietly overturn knife restrictions across U.S.



Todd Rathner, director of legislative affairs for Knife Rights, browses knives during the Usual Suspect Gathering, where knife and other industry related vendors displayed and sold products last month in Las Vegas. (Bridget Bennett/For The Washington Post)

By **Todd C. Frankel** September 15 at 7:43 PM

LAS VEGAS — He ordered the 20-ounce rib-eye, and so the waitress at the upscale restaurant dropped off a wood-handled serrated steak knife. Doug Ritter ignored it. Instead he pulled out a folding knife, its 3.4-inch blade illegal to carry concealed here in Clark County. He flicked it open with one hand. When the steak arrived,

medium-rare, he started cutting.

The steak dinner came as Ritter was savoring his many successful attempts at repealing the nation's knife laws. Decades-old restrictions on switchblades, daggers and stilettos have fallen away in state after state in recent years. Much of this is because of Ritter and his little-known Arizona-based advocacy group Knife Rights, which has used tactics borrowed from the National Rifle Association to rack up legislative victories across the nation. And many of the changes have escaped widespread notice, obscured, in part, by the nation's focus on guns.

But knife fans know. The morning after his steak dinner, Ritter walked like a celebrity into a major knife convention here.

"Thank you for everything you're doing for us. Really," an official with knife maker Ka-Bar told him.

"I live in Louisiana, so thank you," said another convention-goer, hailing from a state that abandoned its switchblade ban this summer.

Ritter, 65, said that knives, like guns, should be considered arms protected by the Second Amendment. He doesn't support any restriction on knives — not on switchblades or push daggers or even the ballistic knives that shoot like spears from a handle.



Todd Rathner, director of legislative affairs for Knife Rights, holds a one-handed open knife during the Usual Suspect Gathering. (Bridget Bennett/For The Washington Post)

That's become a winning argument. Twenty-one states have repealed or weakened their knife laws since 2010, many of them with bipartisan support, including Colorado, Michigan and Illinois. New York came close to doing the same last year. Ohio could be next. Texas passed its bill last year despite a high-profile stabbing death just days before lawmakers voted. And Knife Rights, with little financial backing, has been working behind the scenes to help make it happen.

"A lot of people said it would be impossible to repeal a switchblade law in any state. Insane. Tilting at windmills," Ritter said. "Turns out they were wrong."

The success of Knife Rights comes as calls for weapons bans have intensified following mass shootings, such as the one here in Las Vegas last year that left 58 people dead.

Guns are by far the leading cause of homicides in the nation.

But knives are No. 2, according to the FBI, making up 11 percent of killings in 2016 and a growing number of violent crimes.

Yet knives have escaped comparable scrutiny.

The FBI records about 1,600 knife slayings a year, a number dwarfed by the 7,100 annual handgun killings. But that is still four times as high as the number killed by rifles, including the assault-style rifles that are the focus of gun-control activists.

There are mass stabbings, too, but they tend to receive less attention. In 2014, a 16-year-old student wounded 21 people at a Pittsburgh high school with a knife. Last year, a man allegedly used a knife to kill two people and injure a third at a train station in Portland, Ore. In July, a man stabbed nine people, killing a 3-year-old girl, at her birthday party in Boise, Idaho.

But little is known about knife violence in the United States. No national statistics track the kind of knife used in crimes. There is no group opposing expanded knife rights.

“It certainly makes our job easier,” Ritter said.

This is contrasted with how knife crime is treated in countries such as Britain and Australia, where guns are more strictly regulated and knife crimes are publicly debated.

In the United States, knife activists acknowledge gun violence’s influence on attitudes toward knives.

“If someone would try to be anti-knife in America, it’s like, why are you worrying about knives when we have all this gun stuff?” said Evan Nappen, an attorney who works with Knife Rights. “It helps the knife movement.”

Now, Knife Rights is going after its biggest legislative target: overturning the 1958 Federal Switchblade Act, which bans the interstate shipment or importation of knives that open at the push of a button. It’s a long shot, but Ritter met earlier this month with lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

“We’re trying to frame it as a freedom issue,” Ritter said in Washington, before disappearing into a congressman’s office.

Building credibility

Ritter started Knife Rights in 2006 after reading a newspaper article he thought was critical of knife ownership.

Ritter, who lives outside Phoenix, designs knives. He works as a survivalist consultant. And he worries about a push to restrict knives.

“It was an epiphany for me that we might be facing in the United States the same kind of antipathy against pocketknives that I saw in Europe,” he said.

But he didn’t have any experience as an activist.

Then, U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents “did me a favor,” he said.

In 2009, the agency proposed adding spring-assisted knives to the Federal Switchblade Act. That would have hurt sales of pocketknives that open with one hand. A bipartisan group of lawmakers moved to protect the knives.

Ritter’s fledgling group joined others in lobbying for the change. The knife industry already had a trade group, the American Knife & Tool Institute. Ritter positioned Knife Rights as advocating for knife owners.

“We suddenly had some credibility,” Ritter said.

Later that year, he hired Todd Rathner as Knife Rights’s lobbyist after meeting him at a gun rights conference.

Rathner, 52, today describes himself as America’s only knife lobbyist.

Rathner, also a National Rifle Association board member, said lessons learned from the gun rights group have been instrumental.

“The NRA’s successes certainly make some parts of our argument more logical, and it paves the way,” Rathner said.

But Knife Rights has tried to avoid the polarizing politics of the gun debate. And the organization is small, raising only \$215,000 in 2015, according to the most recent available Internal Revenue Service filings, plus an additional \$215,000 for its nonprofit foundation.

Ritter, who serves as the unpaid chairman of both groups, said the money comes from knife users and manufacturers. He declined to reveal membership numbers. Most of the funding, Ritter said, goes toward paying Rathner and for both men to fly across the country.

Hollywood's influence

Many of the nation’s knife laws were passed in the late 1950s and focused on banning switchblades. Some states restricted blade lengths and design.

Knife activists dismiss these laws as overreactions to fears of knife-wielding thugs from a bygone era. “[Rebel Without a Cause](#)” hit theaters in 1955. “West Side Story” and its depiction of rival Jets and Sharks appeared on Broadway in 1957.

“There’s nothing special about these knives other than Hollywood demonized the heck out of them,” Ritter said.

The knife laws started to change in 2010.

Ritter and Rathner helped win a repeal of New Hampshire’s ban on switchblades, dirks, daggers and stilettos. They helped push Arizona, their home state, to repeal all local knife ordinances. The “preemption bill” was a classic NRA tactic, usually used to prevent cities from imposing their own stricter guns laws.

Knife-friendly bills in Utah, Georgia and Tennessee followed.

The argument was simple: Everyone has a kitchen knife. The switchblade-twirling gangs are not a modern-day threat. Knife laws, they said, are outdated.

“They never accomplished anything,” Ritter said, “and it’s time for them to go away.”

But the topic remained a partisan one, mostly supported by Republicans.

Then they hit upon an idea to gain a broader base of support.

“This was a criminal justice issue,” Rathner said.

Unusual allies

That led them to try to repeal knife laws in an unlikely place: New York.

In New York, Knife Rights teamed up with the Legal Aid Society to challenge the state’s ban on gravity knives, which have blades that fall from the handle. The ban was interpreted to include knives that open with a flick of the wrist, making it illegal to carry certain pocketknives, although which ones depended on a subjective test.

About 4,000 people are arrested each year in New York City for carrying illegal knives, many of them tradesmen who have no idea their tools are prohibited, according to the Legal Aid Society. Most of those arrested are minorities.

Yet the knives are still widely sold at sporting goods and hardware stores.

“Why is it you’re going to call the knife illegal when it’s in the hands of our clients who are black and Latino,” said Hana Robrish, a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society, “but legal to be sold on the shelves of our stores?”

The unusual coalition between Knife Rights and the Legal Aid Society pushed state lawmakers to legalize knives that open with a flick of the wrist. New York City police and prosecutors objected. In 2016 and again last year, the bill passed the statehouse overwhelmingly, only to be vetoed by the governor.

Tragedy in Texas

The biggest win for Knife Rights came last year in Texas, highlighting the group’s influence.

Already, Knife Rights had helped persuade Texas in 2013 to repeal its switchblade ban.

Now, Ritter and Rathner were back to erase restrictions on all other knives — from daggers to swords to bowie knives.

It should have been easy.

“Knives are the new guns. And Republicans in Texas always look for new ways to relax gun laws,” said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political-science professor at the University of Houston.

Rathner said he got Democrats on board with the criminal justice argument.

“Their constituents are the ones being charged for carrying this kind of knife,” he said. “They recognize that this isn’t a good thing.”

But five days before a vote, a random stabbing rampage at the University of Texas at Austin, near the statehouse, left one student dead and three wounded.

The attacker used a long bowie knife.

“That was the exact knife we were trying to legalize the carrying of,” Rathner said

He knew his bill was in trouble. He booked the first flight to Austin. But Rathner found a compromise: a bill to legalize all knives except those longer than 5½ inches when carried in restricted places such as schools.

Days later it passed the House 135 to 1.

The governor signed the bill into law.

It took Lori Brown by surprise. Her son, Harrison Brown, 19, was the student stabbed to death in Austin. She was lost in a fog of grief. She only later learned lawmakers had passed the knife bill. She didn’t know what to do. She felt alone.

But the mass shooting in February at a high school in Parkland, Fla., motivated her. She began calling legislators

and the governor. She even called Rathner. She told him about her son. Rathner explained why he opposed knife laws. She told him why stronger laws were needed.

“I will fight, and I will fight,” she said recently. “I have nothing to lose.”

She pledged to be in Austin when legislators return early next year.

Knife Rights will be there, too. Ritter and Rathner hope to cut the last remaining knife laws from the books.



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