

## Policy 360 – Episode 76 – Sari Kaufman - Transcript

- Gunther Peck: Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm your host this time, Gunther Peck. I'm a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and I also direct the Hart Leadership Program. I'm very pleased to welcome Sari Kaufman to the program. Sari is a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which was a site of a horrific mass shooting earlier this year on Valentine's Day. 17 staff and students were killed, and many others were injured. A former student has confessed to being the gunman. Since the shooting, Sari has become remarkable activist. She's worked alongside her friends to register thousands of voters. Welcome to Policy 360.
- Sari Kaufman: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here today.
- Gunther Peck: So Sari, we need to begin at the moment you became a propelled into this place of leadership. You were a sophomore when the shooting happened. If you could briefly recount what you experienced that day?
- Sari Kaufman: So February 14th, it was Valentine's Day, and just like any other day, my mom dropped me off before school and I said, "Pick me up at this time," not thinking anything would happen. Go to school. I have a Spanish test that day, so I'm starting with my friends a little nervous and then in second period a fire drill goes off and we were all a little aware just because we normally don't have it that early in the morning, but we just went back to class like any other day. And then I take my Spanish test in third period, go to lunch, talking with my friends. We had a test the next day, so we're all worried about that.
- Sari Kaufman: And then I go to fourth period and I'm in my debate class, it's more of a relaxed class. The fire alarm goes off again, and we are now a little uneasy just because why would we have to fire drills in a row? But again, we just went outside where you stood in the zone that we had to be in. And then, all of a sudden, we hear five noises and we think it's gunshots, but it's Parkland and we always joke that nothing happens in Parkland because a quiet, safe town. We never have high crime. So we all look at each other like, "Okay, that must not be what we think it is. It's going to be fine."
- Sari Kaufman: And then all of a sudden we see a police car driving on our baseball field going extremely fast and with their sirens on and it seems like all at the same moment we get text messages from our friends who are in the building where the shooting was occurring and saying, "My friend just got shot," and seeing videos on Snapchat of our friends getting shot at. And that's when we realized ... It was very surreal, but that's when we realized we're in a shooting and I just went into survival mode. We just have to get out of the area and run as fast as we can.
- Sari Kaufman: Administrators started running towards us, and police in SWAT gear starting to run towards us, and they just kept screaming, "Run, run, run." So the middle school is right next to our high school. So we ran behind the middle school and

to a local store, just we went to Walmart. And we got to Walmart and we thought we were going to be okay because it should be over by then and then all of a sudden the police say, "We don't know where the shooter is, keep running." And it's just after going through running behind the middle school, trying to escape what happened and then thinking you're safe and then realizing you're not safe. It's just extremely difficult, especially when you're also getting texts making sure that your friends are okay.

Sari Kaufman: So we keep running and we go to a local store, local restaurant, and we turn on the TV and it all still felt like I was in a dream. But once I looked at the TV and CNN and Fox, all of the major news outlets were saying first it was five dead at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and then 10 dead. And it was obviously heartbreaking. And then when it's 17 dead, it's just, it's un-comprehensible. And I was continuing to get texts from my family and friends, even numbers I didn't even know saying, "Are you okay?"

Sari Kaufman: And I saw the community come together that day, just strangers helping strangers, like the coolest kids helping kids who they would never touch or would never want to talk to. And it was just extremely ... It's hard to put in words how I felt that day just because after going to the same place where you learn and then that turning into a crime scene and people who are ... One of my friends, they were taking a test, and actually they were writing an essay, and then I say turned into someone being dead at their own desk. It's just unimaginable.

Gunther Peck: Well, thank you for sharing what is obviously a trauma that is something that you've experienced in remarkable ways and that none of us wishes, ever, to undergo. What is remarkable about your story is not simply the trauma, but the response of you and your peers. And obviously the context also matters. After so many of these horrific high school shootings, something different happened at your high school in which a group of students really began to challenge the narrative and opened up a space for a national conversation about gun violence in schools and what to do, which is remarkable.

Sari Kaufman: Thank you.

Gunther Peck: Yeah. And I guess I'm really interested in if you could share with us first how you got from the trauma of that event to that sense of ownership of the moment?

Sari Kaufman: I think that after the shooting it wasn't ... A lot of people look at the movement we started, and people think that after the shooting, we planned like, "Okay, we're going to have this huge movement," but it was really just... It was very natural. After the shooting, I needed to cope in a certain way. So I started writing about my experience. And since I had to debate that topic of universal background checks for guns in December, I had a sense of responsibility kind of to share my knowledge that I had gained, to share with other people. So I incorporated that when I was writing my experience, and a lot of news outlets then made into editorial and it got shared in so many places. And right after

that, it all seems like it was just a couple weeks that this movement really started. But right after that, we went to Tallahassee to lobby legislators.

Sari Kaufman: And again, it was just a very natural process. It was, "Okay, this happened. What can we do? This is what we can do." So we went to Tallahassee, we lobbied legislators about gun violence prevention and what they can do to help us. And then after that it kind of transformed into, "Okay, we can have an event on March 24th where we bring the whole entire country together." And obviously it felt ... We were a little pessimistic, but since what we just went through brought us all the way to our low, we thought the only thing that could come out of this is positivity, just because everything was so negative, and especially after going to our friend's funerals at the same exact time as us trying to create change. I think everyone in Parkland just had a sense of responsibility after what we had to experience.

Gunther Peck: I mean, do you like responsibility to the 17 good people who passed?

Sari Kaufman: I think, yeah. I think one of my ... Alyssa Alhadeff, she was in my math class, and she passed away. And coming into the class when we came back to school and seeing her desk empty, it just pushes you and you come home to, "Okay, what can we do? What can we do so another student doesn't have to walk into their class and see it desk empty because of a shooting?"

Gunther Peck: Yeah, yeah. First of all, let me just say, it's interesting that your process of becoming active began with a writing reflection. I think that's really extraordinary in and of itself. Like that became a way for you to process but also to engage what you can do. So what led you from pressing legislators with your peers, collaborating with them, to your own particular focus on voting rights? Because I think that's also remarkable that that would be the focus, and not just legislation or pressuring for a single legal fix if there is one to the problem of gun violence.

Sari Kaufman: Yeah. I think that when we went to Tallahassee it was very frustrating but very insightful. We found that legislators weren't listening to us even after explaining what happened that day and just a common person to just listen to a group of students. And we found that a lot of them said, "I completely hear you, but I can't do anything because either my party doesn't want to vote that way." Or also even Democrats saying, "I just don't think it could happen and I don't any policy we would implement could stop it." But we knew that we have to be more optimistic than that. And we knew that everyday people could be even more optimistic than the legislators that were in power.

Sari Kaufman: And I think that's when we changed form from focusing on legislators to focusing on the everyday people and seeing that a vote to take away, say one of those legislators and hire a new one, that can be the change. A lot of people in Parkland say in the midterms, let's pretend that it's like a real job. Let's fire them and hire new people. If the same person's doing the same thing and continuing to have a bad record, then at a normal job they would fire them. So

let's have the people, everyday people, be their bosses and go on midterms and fire them. And I really liked that analogy because I think it's a very useful way to explain.

Gunther Peck: That's terrific as a message, especially since we're a week out from the election of midterms. So to understand your leadership, which I think, and others want to know your story, but also to understand how you are thinking and reflecting on what leadership is at this moment, I want before you maybe answer what you think that is and how you fit into that picture, I would like to take us back. If you could take us back to the Sari, the 15 year old Sari who was a normal kid at Parkland, in Parkland, and maybe what your life, what you thought your goals and ambitions were on New Year's Day, at the beginning of this year, of 2018 before this happened. And then maybe draw an arc to where you are now.

Sari Kaufman: Okay. That's interesting. So before February 14th, definitely like a normal teenager, I really care about school, so my New Year's resolution was to continue to do well in school and to continue to like achieve straight A's, and that then was my biggest worry, which is still obviously I want to do well in school, but you know, that's the end all be all to obtain the grades. That's really all students and high school can do is just to do well in school and that's really the only change they can make, and then later in life that's when they can make the change. So like now looking back, I still obviously do well, I try to do well in school, but to see that I can make the change in high school and I don't have to wait until I set myself up for life and that's when I make the change.

Sari Kaufman: So that's really interesting just when I reflect back before the 14th. But I've always been involved in school. I'm on my debate team. I play Lacrosse, I play really competitive Lacrosse, so I think being in the nature of like playing sports and having to kind of take that leadership role in sports, say like when you're down by two points and I play defense. So having that pressure to make sure you can stop the ball, to bring it to offense. I think having that pressure, I sometimes relate that to kind of the pressure that I am now trying to get people to vote. Just like that competitive experience. But yeah, I still hang out with my friends and do everything that a teenager does. We have homecoming and school dances, but yeah.

Gunther Peck: That's good. Good to hear. It's not all about activism and leadership. Let me read one thing you wrote, because I think it does speak to this transition and the sense of agency you have that is really compelling and also inspiring. But in your op-ed that was published a week after the shooting, you wrote, "I want to be optimistic, but the truth is I'm very pessimistic about new political changes. How is this generation going to have faith in our system if time and time again it fails to protect our lives?" That is such a haunting and beautiful, almost like scorching question. And I think I just want to, before you answer anything, like I just want to hold that up. The leadership in that question, the moral integrity of that, it's a fearless question, and I admire that.

Sari Kaufman: Thank you.

Gunther Peck: But I do want to ask, do you still feel that way? Because this pessimism in this, so how do you feel? Has that evolved?

Sari Kaufman: Yeah, it's definitely evolved. Since it was a week after the shooting, I was still ... The emotions were very raw and I was angry and upset and trying to find my way. I definitely do feel more optimistic and seeing that everyday ... Understand ... Before I didn't really understand our system as much, but understanding that everyday people who vote then can make that change, now I feel more optimistic. But I think the biggest thing to take away from that is people have to vote. If people don't vote and youth voter turnout is still low, then I might still feel a little more pessimistic because I think that the 18 year olds who go out and vote, they're like innocent. They haven't seen ... I guess they don't really have a cynical view on life and they're more optimistic. So when they go and vote, they can have more of that optimistic outline I guess of life. But yeah, I would say that I'm more positive of what our future can bring, if people vote though.

Gunther Peck: Yeah. I say another way of thinking about voting might be one of the reasons we vote is to affect change. Another reason you vote is simply for its own sake, that the act of voting actually does sort of change how we view the world, how we view our place in it. And it's not about winning or losing, although I appreciate the competitor in you in wanting to win if you're down two goals. For every underdog in American political history, I just have to say right on, that is the spirit that uplifts the democracy at its best. But I'm curious if there are particular things you've learned about engagement? And maybe also like if you can share and how have you sought to persuade the doubting Thomas's, or the students who really feel disengaged, like their vote doesn't count or they can't vote? How have you persuaded them to engage?

Sari Kaufman: Yeah. I think that that's definitely been the most difficult thing is to get someone who isn't engaged at all to engage. But I think asking them why, like there has to be something that occurred in their life to feel that way or something that they've watched, especially right now in the news, how it's so polarizing, and going through the process with saying, "I understand where you're coming from." and kind of put yourself at the same level as them and then bring them through the process of, "Well, this is how I changed my mind to see that I can be engaged, and if I am engaged, then I can create that change that I want to see."

Sari Kaufman: And also everyone cares about something. People complain all the time and if you are able to say, "Okay, so you're complaining, even about a bicycle, you want to be safe when you're riding your bicycle. Well if you go out November six and you vote for a councilman who would be in favor of creating a bicycle lane, which is so simple and could affect you every single day, then that's something that you can be engaged with." I think there's a misconception of voting that it's only about presidents and governors. I would argue sometimes that local elections are more important than voting for president and governors because you can see the change almost right away. So I think that's a way to get people

engaged, instead of just having a memorized list of why it's important to vote, adapt to what's important to them.

Gunther Peck: I feel like I'm talking to an old, wise soul who understands our democracy and then it's like I'm talking to Sari Kaufman who's 16. I just ... Yeah. I don't know if this is appropriate, but you rock. I just want to say that.

Sari Kaufman: Thank you.

Gunther Peck: Okay, I just want to say one other thing. I think that part of what is effective about engaging people who are maybe not only to ask them why they're disengaged, you wouldn't say that, but there is a good reason, very often, people feel the way they do. It's not apathy. It's there's something stronger there. And so I also think that your capacity to articulate that, the way in which you write, "The truth is I am pessimistic about new political change." I actually think that honesty makes you a better leader and better able to engage where people are because it's real. It's honest, it's truthful, and it's a beautiful antidote to the kind of partisan soundbites that, at this point unfortunately, is the kind of political dialogue most people experience. So thank you. Thank you for being that kind of listener and engaged advocate. It is inspiring.

Sari Kaufman: Thank you.

Gunther Peck: I just have one more question for you, Sari. If you could pick one leadership lesson that you've learned in the last year, what would it be?

Sari Kaufman: I think the most important leadership lesson is to be a leader, but not to always say that your position is a leader, because I think if you're able to have that common ground with other people and put yourself at the same level and position as everyone and be able to be real with people, you are able to see what matters to everybody, no matter their level, especially like socioeconomic level or even like at school, it's like their popularity level, and then bring that and to really see what's important to them. A lot of times I think a lot of leaders kind of close out and only think what they can do, but I've learned, especially in our democracy that it's about what the people can do.

Gunther Peck: Right on. Well, thank you very much for joining me today on Policy 360. Sari Kaufman is a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Sari was on Duke's campus to participate in a panel discussion about the challenges to student voting rights. The event was part of a special series run by the Hart Leadership Program called Connected to Politics. The series is exposing students to new generation of young political leaders. We'll be back soon with another episode of Policy 360. Until then, I'm Gunther Peck.