

Message to Congress: Show Courage on Gun Safety

Written by Marc Morial
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"Sometimes I close my eyes and all I can remember is that awful day...But other times, I feel Ben's presence filling me with courage for what I have to do..." Francine Wheeler, mother of six-year-old Ben Wheeler, one of the 26 victims of the December 14 Sandy Hook tragedy.

I recently took my children to see the newly released movie, "42," the story of Jackie Robinson's courageous struggle to become the first African American Major League Baseball player. The movie also highlights the courage it took for Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, to sign Robinson to a major league contract in 1947, marking the end of more than 50 years of all-white teams. In his first year with the Dodgers, Robinson was subjected to racial taunts and threats from white fans and opposing teams, as well as hostility from some of his own teammates, who objected to sharing the field and locker room with a Black ballplayer. But Jackie Robinson exhibited a rare brand of courage, refusing to lash out as he piled up hits and blazed the base paths on his way to becoming Major League Baseball's first Rookie of the Year. Robinson went on to have a Hall of Fame career, and until his death in 1972, he was also an all-star champion of civil rights. Martin Luther King once described Jackie as, "... a pilgrim that walked in the lonesome byways toward the high road of Freedom. He was a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom."

The life of Jackie Robinson is a profile in courage that has inspired generations of Americans, including millions of young children. I thought about that this past weekend as I watched the tearful plea of a mother who lost her child on December 14th at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. Just four months after the loss of her son, Ben, Francine Wheeler found the courage to deliver President Obama's weekly address to the nation. Visibly shaken, she used the opportunity to passionately implore Congress to "come together and pass commonsense gun responsibility reforms that will make our communities safer and prevent more tragedies like the one we thought would never happen to us."

It is time for Congress to display similar courage by quickly taking a vote on the bipartisan measure reached last week to expand background checks for online gun purchasers and gun

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show sales. While this legislation is hardly a final answer, it is at least a first step and would demonstrate that our leaders have the backbone to stand up for the American people in the face of opposition and threats from a well-funded and obstinate gun lobby.

As the movie "42" makes clear, change occurs when people choose to show courage in the face of adversity. The film demonstrates that it takes the courage of more than one to bring about change and that courage means doing what's right, regardless of the odds. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball years before Thurgood Marshall argued *Brown v. Board of Education* and Rosa Parks took her seat on the bus. There was no blueprint for him to follow. But Congress has a blueprint to guide them as they are challenged to enact meaningful legislation to make America safer. It's time to put the politics aside, and pick up some courage.