CONGRESSIONAL RECORD—SENATE
May 27, 1999

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, a young Alaskan, a freshman in Colony High School in the Matanuska Valley town of Wasilla, wrote an opinion piece in the Anchorage Daily News this week which shows thoughtfulness and wisdom well beyond his 15 years.

Travis Johnson sat down at his computer the day after the tragedy at Columbine High School, and wrote from the heart his feelings and his ideas on how to prevent further tragedies like Columbine.

He showed the essay to his parents who were moved and impressed with their youngster’s effort. His mother, a physician, and his dad, an insurance executive, grew up in Anchorage. While they are not hunters themselves, they have friends and family who are gun owners and who hunt.

Travis shares his essay with his English teacher, his dad suggested that he send it to the Anchorage Daily News.

Travis refutes the ideas that guns and violence on television and in films are responsible for incidents like Columbine.

Travis believes that parents must be more and more involved with their children. He asks the parents who read his opinion piece “to talk to your kids, even though you may not want to, and your kids may act like they don’t want to talk to you.” And he tells teens to talk to their parents.

Mr. President, Travis Johnson’s observations and ideas are important insights into how to avoid further incidents like those in Colorado and Georgia, from a teen who understands how teens feel.

I ask unanimous consent that his column from the May 25 Anchorage Daily News, titled “Parents Are the Only Answer to Teens’ Problems” be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Anchorage Daily News, May 25, 1999]

PARENTS ARE THE ONLY ANSWER TO TEENS’ PROBLEMS
(By Travis Johnson)

I’m sure all of those who are reading this paper have heard of the recent Columbine High School shooting incident in which two students walked into the school and started a massacre that left 15 people dead. My heart goes out to those families and their loss. Upon hearing about this incident, I found myself very disturbed. How could two seemingly “normal” high school students (I use the word “normal” lightly because there is really no such thing as a normal high school student) be capable of doing something like this? I listened to television reports about what might be responsible for this incident. The two that seemed to be most stressed were harassment from peers and guns. It seemed as though the combination of these two automatically justified a killing spree.

First, let’s think about the issue of harassment from peers. Every day I go to school,
and I am judged. So is everybody else around me. I can't do without the 2nd Amendment, laws, and their potential consequences. But I know many people around me have it worse than me, especially my school's own group of trench coat-wearers, commonly referred to as "Goths." To admit there are firearms in my household, I'm even proud of it. I'm not especially popular, and I could easily find out how to make bombs on the Internet. I'm sure many of the "Gotha" at my school have access to the same materials. Given this information, I think that it's time to talk about guns today. So if you are thinking about starting a homicidal rampage, don't you think? I don't think so! Just because people are harassed doesn't justify a killing.

In the real world, people are harassed all the time. I think it's just life. There are mean people out there. Live with it. The killers at Columbine High School were lacking in something in their personalities to do something like this. That is self-control, self-esteem, and an understanding of the value of life. I think this has less to do with harassment with the killers themselves. If the killers had better values, this never would have happened.

Maybe firearms are to blame? I'm sure many people would immediately say so. For this incident, a series of gun-control laws were proposed, including a proposal to raise the age limit to own a handgun from 18 to 21. Do people really think that if the handgun age limit was higher, this incident would have never happened? I hate to say it, but welcome to politics. In the real world, it's what people want to see is action. It has to be quick, it has to be cheap and it has to keep them from being responsible. Politicians realize this, so immediately they come up with a "solution" that fits these criteria. It doesn't have to work; people just have to think it does. So what happens? Well, they scream, "Guns are the problem!" and we all lose more rights.

The truth is, if somebody wants to kill someone with a firearm laws banning guns aren't going to stop them. A lot of guns used in robberies are stolen. Well, if we got rid of the runners in the world, then we would have a solution, right? Nope, people would use other homemade weapons, bombs, knivets.

A gun is a tool, not a weapon. It is a tool for hunting, recreation and protection. It can be a historical piece, it can be a keep-sake, it can represent something. Guns are not to blame for the Columbine High School incident.

By now you might be asking yourself what is to blame. Unfortunately, it's a problem not many people want to face. It starts at the home. It starts with a lack of discipline, a lack of love, and a lack of values. I'm sure that if the parents of the boys involved in this shooting incident has been more involved with their kids, this incident would have never happened.

The parents are not completely to blame. Today's violent television society illustrates this violence as a normal everyday thing. This makes it difficult to draw the line between what is acceptable and what is not. Sometimes, these things add together, resulted in the final problem: The boys responsible for this shooting. In the end, it is they who are responsible.

So, we have to do some things to prevent another tragedy like this one? To all the parents who are reading this talk to your kids! Even though you may not want to and your kids may not want to listen to you, just knowing you're willing to talk often helps. Spend time with them, draw them to activities that keep them busy and feeling useful. Even target shooting! If parents teach their kids how to use and respect a firearm, they'll be less likely to abuse it than if their parents avoid telling them about guns.

To all of the kids and teens reading this: talk to your parents. They can be a valuable source of information and can help you when you feel like giving up. Other things you can do include complimenting people instead of insulting them, always remembering that you are important, having good friends, and reporting to authorities if anyone you know makes dangerous threats against you or anyone else. By doing this we might be able to prevent another incident like the one that occurred at Columbine High School. I hope that everyone reading this will pray for the families affected by the shooting and take my advice to heart.

RECOGNITION OF SERVICE TO THE SENATE

Mr. DOMENICI. Mr. President, it is with some sadness but also with some pride that I introduce today to recognize Austin Smythe—a longstanding and highly respected member of the Senate Budget Committee staff. After nearly 15 years of service to the Senate and the Congress, Austin will begin employment in the private sector at the end of this week.

Those who know Austin in this Chamber, know he is a Senator's dream staffer. Austin is dedicated, loyal, intelligent, and above all else possessing integrity beyond reproach. He came to the Senate Budget Committee in December 1983, as the committee's energy budget expert. Over the years, he gradually took on more responsibilities and, of course, long hours, and sleepless nights, that we—and indeed the country—all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. For without Austin's dedication, and staff like him, the things we have gotten right would never have happened.

I wish Austin and his family the best. And on behalf of all the Budget Committee members, the committee staff, and indeed the entire Senate, thank you Austin for a job well done. We all will miss you.

KIDNAPPING OF SENATOR CORDOBA IN COLOMBIA

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I rise today to express my deep concern over the kidnapping of Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba de Castro. Senator Córdoba was abducted on May 21 by paramilitary forces on the command of Carlos Castaño. I urge the Government of Colombia to take all appropriate measures to obtain her safe release and to bring those responsible for this kidnapping to justice.

Senator Córdoba, as President of the Colombian Senate's Human Rights Commission, is a strong voice in Colombia for the promotion of human rights. She has also been a leader in efforts to bring peace to Colombia after fifty years of political violence. Senator Córdoba's role as a leading advocate for human rights and peace makes this crime particularly shocking.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has also condemned the kidnapping of Senator Córdoba and has urged the Colombian authorities to do everything possible to obtain her release. Secretary-General Annan called Senator Córdoba "a firm supporter of peace" who had "performed invaluable work towards the achievement of fundamental rights and freedom".

It is extremely disturbing to see that paramilitary forces and guerrilla groups involved in Colombia's internal conflict continue to resort to kidnapping as a means of political pressure. This violent action against a prominent human rights advocate emphasizes the importance of the efforts of President Pastrana to eliminate all links between the Colombian Government and the paramilitaries.

I urge the Government of Colombia to take all necessary and appropriate measures to break these links, obtain Senator Córdoba's release, and bring to justice those responsible for her kidnapping.