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News

# How ex-NRA chief David Keene was tricked into delivering a fake graduation speech

The speech was used as part of powerful gun violence prevention campaign videos.

by Sabrina Ortiz / July 13, 2021



LAS VEGAS: Former National Rifle Association president and gun activist David Keene and gun rights advocate and author Dr. John Lott were asked last month to speak at a graduation ceremony at James Madison Academy. But when they showed up, they ended up delivering their speeches to 3,044 empty chairs.

Keene and Lot spoke anyway and videos capturing the event went viral.

Turns out, Keene and Lott were tricked. The school doesn't actually exist.

Who was behind the effort? Change the Ref, an organization that aims to "raise awareness about mass shootings through strategic interventions that will reduce the influence of the NRA on the Federal level," according to its website. The organization was founded by Manuel and Patricia Oliver who lost their son Joaquin at the 2017 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

The 3,044 empty chairs represented young adults who should have graduated from high school this year and instead were killed by gun violence.

In the videos, Lott and Keene's graduation speeches advocating for gun rights protections and talking about James Madison and the Second Amendment are interspersed with audio of 911 calls made when schools were undergoing shootings and the sound of gunfire.

"Since we lost Joaquin almost four years ago, we started looking for new ways for debating and fighting gun violence, specifically nontraditional ways to do this," said Manuel Oliver.

Joaquin died three months before his own high school graduation. Manuel Oliver recalled how at his son's graduation, there was no empty chair for where his son should have been sitting. The idea for this video stems from that moment.

The team began working on the campaign in February, having high school graduation season as the target release date.

There are a total of three videos in this campaign, the first showing Keene's address, the second Lott's and lastly a testimony from Manuel and Patricia Oliver themselves. The closing for all the videos is a petition for people to join the fight for universal background checks to prevent more children from dying at the hands of gun violence.



The videos have accumulated over half a million views on YouTube alone. When speaking with the creative agency involved, Leo Burnett, they shared that the marketing strategy was simply to let the videos speak for themselves.

"The hero videos were really important for us, we really were putting all our eggs in a basket hoping that those videos would be powerful enough in themselves to get that shock value and also allude to the fact that this wasn't just an emotional film but a big undertaking, an actual action that for the first time was going at one of the causes for the lack of progress in gun control," said Sam Shepherd, EVP and executive creative director at Leo Burnett.

Lott has vocalized his frustration with the campaign because of the lies and deceit the campaign utilized for his involvement. He also claims that the video was edited in a way that warps what was said in reality, and urges Change the Ref to release the full video.

"There are all sorts of errors, from the claims of the number of lives to other things that are there are really disturbing," said Lott.

Originally, he wanted to give general life advice in his commencement speech as he would to one of his own children, but the team insisted that he speak about James Madison and background checks.

Lott also noted that he drove from Montana to Las Vegas for 13 hours because he was repeatedly told by the team that it would mean a lot to the school if he was there because the students and families really wanted him there.

Lott added that he does believe in background checks, unlike what the video portrays. He just thinks the system of background checks in place now is not working.

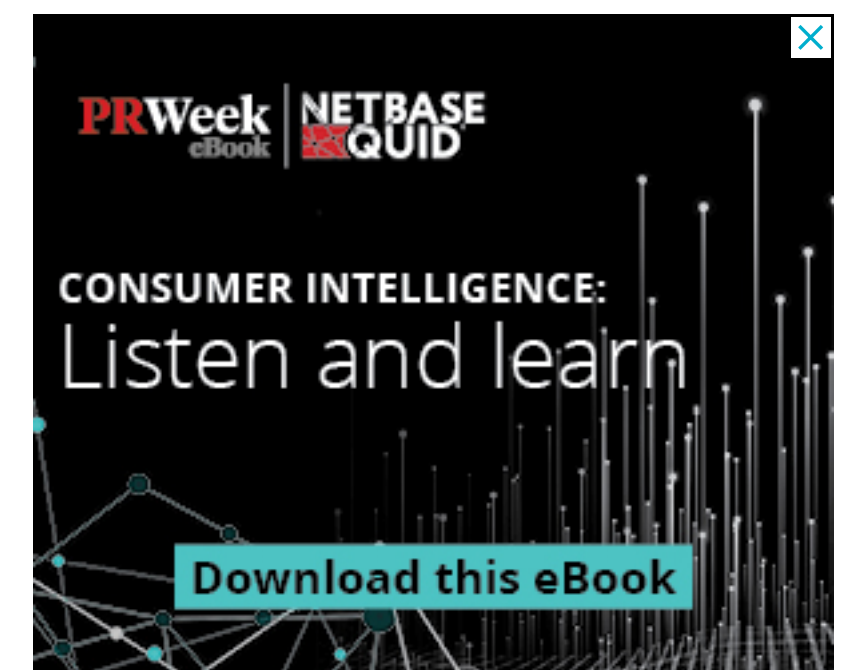
When Manuel Oliver was asked about the accusation of deceitful editing, he said, "I do know he said those words, I was there, and I was right there when he was speaking."

Manuel Oliver added that he thinks that Lott's reaction is telling of the problem.

"The most important thing is I don't want this to become a story about Lott and how he feels like the victim; that is the first red flag," he said. "You are totally out of focus when that is your issue. The problem here is that kids, brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers are dying per day in an amazing number, and we are trying to fight that back."

Change the Ref plans to continue to push the boundaries and do the unexpected to raise awareness about gun safety and cause real change.

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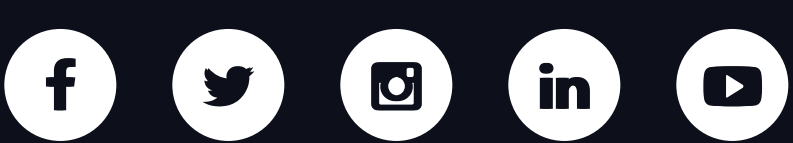
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