



Kin and country . . . Brazilian migrant Diego with wife Nakita and daughter Fiona in Pennsylvania. All pictures: KYLE CASSIDY

Still living in the Wild West

A frontier mindset drives the American gun culture



By STEFANIE BALOGH

Careening their high-powered weaponry while lounging on comfy, suburban couches with their fresh-faced kids and cute pets — these are the stark images of America's lust for guns. US photographer Kyle Cassidy travelled around 38 states to document gun-toting Americans armed with one question: Why do you own a gun?

There are an estimated 70 million Americans with their own lethal arsenals and up to 250 million weapons in the US. A recent Small Arms Survey estimates America is the most heavily armed nation in the world with 90 guns for every 100 citizens.

Cassidy says he wanted to put a personal face on gun owners. He discovered there was no particular type of American who owned a weapon. Instead, gun owners proved to be a diverse mix of ordinary-looking mums and dads in the suburbs, armed to protect their families, white-collar office workers with a hobby, or patriotic citizens who wrap themselves in the US Constitution.

"This isn't a book about guns. It's a book about people," Cassidy says.

It's no secret many Americans love their guns and believe the Second Amendment of the US Bill of Rights gives them an interpreted Constitutional right to bear arms. Even the bloodshed at Virginia Tech in April when mentally disturbed gunman Cho Seung-hui carried out America's worst mass-shooting massacre, killing 32 people and then himself, failed to lead to any real debate on US gun regulation.

In *Armed America — Portraits Of Gun Owners In Their Homes*, families proudly pose with their fire-power as their children and pets look on. It's a coffee table collection of photographs

offering an insight into America's gun culture. Judi and Donno took their portrait seriously, dressing to the nines while holding semi-automatic assault weapons. These are the types of guns that were banned in Australia after the Port Arthur massacre but are readily available on gun store shelves around the US. Their son, Uzi — yes, as in the name of the submachine gun — waves innocently to the camera, dressed in a Superman costume. The Pennsylvania couple explain that for them gun ownership is all about protection.

"I own guns for the same reason I own fire extinguishers — while I certainly don't expect or hope for a worst-case scenario, should one present itself, I'm prepared to take an active role in ensuring my family survives," Donno says.

But Professor Joan Burbick, the respected author of *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture And American Democracy*, believes it is unfair to characterise and stereotype all Americans as gun crazy. "I think it is a reflection of a particular group in the US that want to see themselves as the heart of America. I don't think it's true of the entire society as a whole," Burbick says.

"I think most Americans are much more sensible about gun regulation and they want sensible laws.

"I think what has happened is that the gun has taken on political meaning in the US for certain people and that's what they are fighting for."

Burbick says US gun culture is rooted in the mythology of the frontier and the Wild West, conjuring images of gun owners as heroic, and armed and ready to fight against crime.

Gun ownership stands for a particular way to be an American, she says.

"It means to really see the armed citizen as a hero and to see America basically under the story of crime. I think that means you basically abandon any collective or social responsibility for the social issues we have in the US," she says.

In *Armed America*, Jennifer and Chris from Washington offer their personal protection and safety as a reason to bear arms.

"I'd say for home security," Jennifer says, as she holds a deadly assault

weapon, with son Daniel, 2, posing in the foreground holding his toys. She says it keeps the family, especially Daniel, safe. Chris chimes in that it's all about what America's founding fathers intended and their God-given right under the Second Amendment.

"My family has owned guns ever since I can track back, through probably about 10 generations," he says. "So I guess it's kind of a family tradition and the fact it's our right."

Diego, who holds his imposing weapon with his wife Nakita by his side and daughter Fiona studying, says he came from Brazil to America.

"The Second Amendment, I think, is one of the best things about this country," he tells Cassidy.

Howard openly professes his love for his arsenal — his historic guns are meticulously displayed in a dedicated room in his Pennsylvania home.

"I love history and I love old mechanical devices — guns are both," he says.

Nick, a teenager from Wisconsin, sits on the couch holding a borrowed 12-gauge shotgun with his dog on his lap. He says he's waiting until he can embrace the American dream of gun ownership fully.

"I don't have my own gun right now. I'm hoping to pick one out soon. Until then, I'm borrowing one," Nick says.

Choosing just the right weapon is clearly a big deal with Americans.

Sitting on a striped sofa in her living room with husband Paul and two young children, Gavin and Emma, Beth proudly shows off her handgun.

"I have one for self-protection," she says. "I was raised to never rely on anyone else to protect me or watch my back. It took me a year to pick out one that I liked."

The might of the grassroots gun owners and the National Rifle Association, one of America's most powerful and influential political lobby groups, cannot be underestimated.

Burbick says gun rights groups define gun ownership very specifically: "You have to be an armed citizen, that's what's necessary to keep our society safe and any discussion of the collective or social responses just disappear."



Family protection . . . Beth, Paul, Gavin and Emma



Ready and waiting . . . Mark and Lori



Historical value . . . Howard with his collection



Family . . . Nick, Jennie and Randi with Sam and Dude



Safe and sound . . . Jennifer, Chris and Daniel



Best friends . . . Kevin with Buddy