

Kelly voices optimism on tighter gun rules

By David Lias

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IdeaFest, an annual event at the University of South Dakota, brought former NASA astronaut Capt. Mark Kelly to the Vermillion campus Wednesday, April 10.

Wednesday night, he talked about his success in space as well as his personal life in a lecture in AalFs Auditorium at Slagle Hall.

During an afternoon press conference, however, his mind was on happenings in the nation's capital, as the U.S. Senate appeared to have struck a deal to expand gun background checks to all commercial sales — whether at gun shows, via the Internet or in any circumstance involving paid advertising.

Kelly and his wife, former U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, are currently at the forefront of pushing Congress to enact stricter gun control measures. It is a role the couple found themselves thrust into after a gunman seriously wounded Giffords in a January 2011 assassination attempt.

The couple's resolve on this issue was strengthened after the December 2012 tragic shootings at Connecticut's Sandy Hook Elementary School. In January, the congresswoman and Kelly announced the formation of a political action committee aimed at preventing gun violence.

"Gabby and I and our organization have been very involved," Kelly said. "I was on the phone just yesterday with a couple of different senators about this very issue, and our organization is actively involved every single day. I'm expecting a call from another U.S. senator today to talk about this."

As Kelly spoke Wednesday afternoon, the Washington Post reported the agreement forged by Sens. Joe Manchin III (D-WV) and Patrick J. Toomey (R-PA)

would be more stringent than current law, which requires checks only when purchases are made through a licensed dealer, but less strict than the requirements originally sought by President Obama and congressional Democrats, who were seeking to expand background checks to nearly every kind of sale.

In a statement Wednesday afternoon, Obama welcomed the two lawmakers' agreement, saying that "common-sense background checks" would make it "harder for dangerous people to get their hands on a gun."

"We have a compromise between Senate Democrats and Republicans, both who are strongly supported by the NRA and have high NRA ratings," Kelly said. "Those are two individuals who, like my wife and I, believe there are some really common sense things we can do to make it much more difficult for criminals and the mentally ill to get access to firearms."

He noted that bipartisan support does exist in Washington, DC, to strengthen background check provisions.

"I think it's a great step forward. It's progress. It might not be the exact solution that maybe I would have preferred, but it looks like it is going to be a good, solid bill," Kelly said. "One of the best things about it is it comes from compromise."

He described his wife as a "moderate Democrat" during her service in the U.S. House, who was often ranked "in the middle" rather than the most liberal or the most conservative member of Congress.

"It's great to see that both sides of the aisle can compromise to do something that will make it more difficult for criminals and the dangerously mentally ill to get a gun," he said.

Kelly is known not only as Giffords' husband, but also as a

former NASA astronaut who flew his first of four missions in 2001 aboard Space Shuttle Endeavour, the same space shuttle that he commanded on its final flight in May 2011.

He has also commanded Space Shuttle Discovery and is one of only two individuals who have visited the International Space Station on four different occasions.

Kelly said, in a response to a question during the press conference, that he has achieved notoriety as an astronaut, as the spouse of a member of Congress who was nearly killed by a gunman, and today as an advocate for stricter gun measures.

"I don't really think about it in those terms," Kelly said. "I'm just trying to do the right thing. When 20 first graders are murdered in their classrooms, I think if anybody feels they can do something to prevent, or at least to reduce the likelihood of that happening again, I think it's people's responsibility to do that."

Kelly is a retired U.S. Navy Captain, best selling-author, prostate cancer survivor, and an experienced naval aviator who flew combat missions during the Gulf War.

"A well-trained, armed security guard is not the worse idea," he said, when asked to respond to the recently approved school sentinel bill that was passed by the South Dakota Legislature. The bill, signed into law by Gov. Dennis Daugaard, allows school boards to decide whether teachers may be armed in classrooms.

"What is often the case in these mass shootings that we see in schools is that these things happen very fast," Kelly said.

A well-trained security guard may be able to do something, under the right circumstances, he said. "I don't think it goes a very long way towards addressing the

main problem which is that we have given criminals and the dangerously mentally ill easy access to firearms.

"This is a complicated issue," Kelly added. "Why is it in this country that we have 15 to 20 times the murder rate of similar countries? It's not just one thing, so I think there are a lot of things we can do."

A well-trained security guard may play an important role in certain places in society, he said.

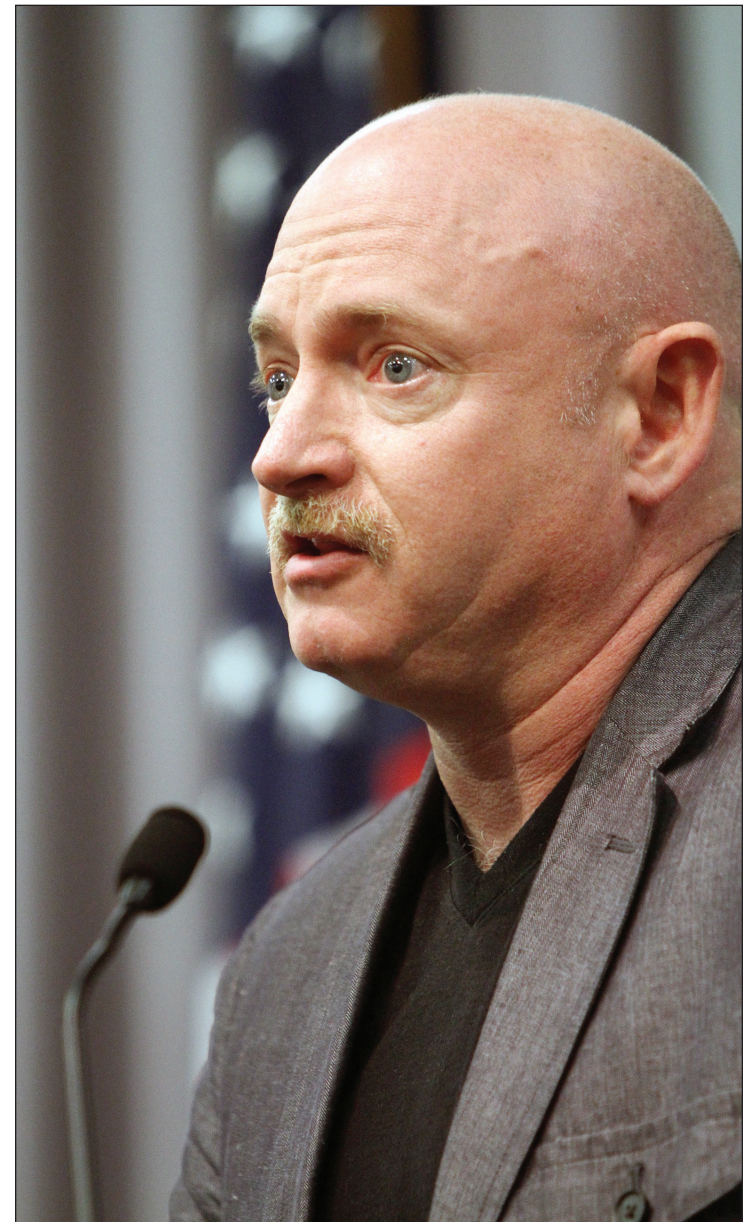
"I don't think it's the worse idea, but to provide a security guard in every elementary school, middle school and high school in this country is a very difficult, and very costly thing to do."

"What do you do when the students go on a trip to a museum? What do you do at the soccer game down the street? Do we really want to have to put an armed security guard in every place where people meet, whether it's a mall or a church or a sporting event? We have a serious problem, but there are ways it can be addressed," he said.

Kelly again cited a confidence in Congress to ultimately "do the right thing," even when only about a week ago, it appeared any gun control measure would wither in the U.S. Senate.

"There's what you see in the media, and then, when you're involved with these negotiations, there's what really is happening," he said. "We know what's going on behind the scenes, and, if you've seen my comments over the last couple weeks, I've been very optimistic."

"I've really felt that we're going to get something done, because members of Congress feel it is the right thing to do," Kelly said. "In regard to background checks, it's something that 90 percent of Americans support. And, nearly 80 percent of the citizens of South Dakota support this type of legislation."



Former NASA astronaut Mark Kelly said during a Wednesday afternoon, April 10 press conference in Vermillion that he is confident Congress will "do the right thing" and tighten rules related to background checks for gun purchasers. Kelly gave a lecture Wednesday night on the USD campus.

(Photo by David Lias)

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