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## High court upholds right to bear arms

*Staff and wire reports*

Chris Hickman likes to practice shooting, as he did Thursday at Asheville's On Target Indoor Shooting Range and Gun Shop.

The 21-year-old Asheville man squeezed off four rounds that all struck his target's center at one point during his session, a skill the criminal justice student hopes will carry him into a law enforcement career.

That familiarity with personal gun use also helps put him among those agreeing with the Supreme Court's landmark ruling Thursday on gun rights.

"I think it's about time the Supreme Court decided to make a ruling in favor of a constitutional amendment instead of trying to change it," Hickman said. "Banning people in the District of Columbia from being able to carry, it wasn't helpful to them if they wanted to defend themselves from criminals. But it didn't stop criminals from having them."

In the court's first major pronouncement on gun rights in U.S. history, justices with a 5-4 ruling struck down the District of Columbia's 32-year-old ban on handguns.

Justices found the ban incompatible with gun rights under the Second Amendment.

The decision went further than even the Bush administration wanted, but probably leaves most firearm laws intact.

The court had not conclusively interpreted the Second Amendment since its ratification in 1791. The amendment reads: "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

The basic issue for the justices was whether the amendment protects an individual's right to own guns no matter what, or whether that right is somehow tied to service in a state militia.

Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia said that an individual right to bear arms is supported by "the historical narrative" both before and after the Second Amendment was adopted.

The Constitution does not permit "the absolute prohibition of handguns held and used for self-defense in the home," Scalia said.

The court also struck down Washington's requirement that firearms be equipped with trigger locks.

In a dissent he summarized from the bench, Justice John Paul Stevens wrote that the majority "would have us believe that over 200 years ago, the Framers made a choice to limit the tools available to elected officials wishing to regulate civilian uses of weapons."

He said such evidence "is nowhere to be found."

Justice Stephen Breyer wrote a separate dissent in which he said, "In my view, there simply is no untouchable constitutional right guaranteed by the Second Amendment to keep loaded handguns in the house in crime-ridden urban areas."

Joining Scalia were Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Samuel Alito, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas. The other dissenters were Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and David Souter.

North Carolinians Against Gun Violence member Eva Ritchey said control groups gained despite the ruling's rejection of a gun ban.

"I thought it was especially significant that one of the most conservative judges on the court, Justice Scalia, wrote that this right like other rights was not absolute and even mentioned licensing as reasonable regulation," said Ritchey, of Hendersonville.

"I agree with Justice Scalia that guns, any type, anytime, and anywhere is not in the best interest of a safe society," Ritchey said.

The ruling provides an opportunity for proponents and opponents of gun laws to work together, said Roxane Kolar, the organization's executive director.

"For a long time a lot of the groups on the other side of this issue have fought against any sort of sensible gun legislation at the fear that they would lose their right to bear arms," Kolar said. "Now that that right has been upheld by the highest court in the land, we look forward to working with them to pass these sensible gun laws that can save lives."

Such legislation might include universal background checks, closing the gun show loophole and keeping guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally ill, Kolar said.

Asheville Rifle and Pistol Club president Mike Keys said the Supreme Court ruling was a step in the right direction for gun ownership.

Keys said he uses handguns for target shooting, but he doesn't keep any loaded weapons at home. He said many gun owners are leery of new regulations, thinking they will eventually lead to a total ban on guns.

"I think for the most part gun ownership has a bad rap, and it's too bad that it does because it's one of the things that keeps our country free," Keys said.

The capital's gun law was among the nation's strictest.

Dick Anthony Heller, 66, an armed security guard, sued the District after it rejected his application to keep a handgun at his home for protection in the same Capitol Hill neighborhood as the court.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled in Heller's favor and struck down Washington's handgun ban, saying the Constitution guarantees Americans the right to own guns and that a total prohibition on handguns is not compatible with that right.

The issue caused a split within the Bush administration. Vice President Dick Cheney supported the appeals court ruling, but others in the administration feared it could lead to the undoing of other gun regulations, including a federal law restricting sales of machine guns.

Other laws keep felons from buying guns and provide for an instant background check.

Scalia said nothing in Thursday's ruling should "cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons or the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings."

The law adopted by Washington's city council in 1976 bars residents from owning handguns unless they had one before the law took effect. Shotguns and rifles may be kept in homes, if they are registered, kept unloaded and either disassembled or equipped with trigger locks.

On Target owner Dawn Stucker said gun rights are "a freedom that we have as Americans" and "a right that we have as individuals."

However, there are many more responsibilities to gun ownership than just cleaning and owning a gun, she said. Education is paramount, she said.

"We feel that there are responsibilities in carrying your gun, in your vehicle transporting it, using it in your home for protection or just target practice," Stucker said. "We're mainly about the freedom and the responsibilities of gun owners."

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