

Senate Bill 675 - Support
Child Custody - Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence -
Training for Judges and Child's Counsel
Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 24, 2021

Thank you Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee. The purpose of this letter is to urge the Committee for a favorable report for Senate Bill 675 entitled Child Custody - Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence - Training for Judges and Child's Counsel.

My parents separated in 1998 with my mother obtaining a Protection from Abuse Order in Baltimore County. Their divorce was final in February 2000, with Judge Norris Byrnes ordering unsupervised visitation for my brother and I every Wednesday for 3 hours and every other weekend. My mother had requested supervised visits because my father had not only been abusive to her, but was abusive to my brother and I. My brother and I begged my mother not to send us on these visits, but she could not because of the court order.

In the Fall of 2000, I disclosed that my father was sexually abusing me, and my mother contacted child protective services. A case was opened, and the police became involved. My brother and I were both interviewed, and the police detective believed us and brought my father in for questioning. They, also, collected evidence at his house. My mother was directed by the Detective to go to the Baltimore County Circuit Court and obtain a Protection from Abuse Order to keep my brother and I away from my father. However, when my mother went to the court, they immediately called Judge Byrnes to hear the case. Judge Byrnes told her he did not believe a father would do this and that, even if it were true, I was only five years old so I would forget about it. I am now 25 years old and have not forgotten it. Judge Byrnes was very ignorant regarding domestic violence and child abuse.

Our case continued for years with my brother and I being abused over and over again. Judge Byrnes appointed his friend, Laurel Reese, as our attorney and Katie Killeen as our custody evaluator. Both of these women would not believe anything that my brother or I said about the abuse and advocated for us to have a loving relationship with our father. My father had taken us to his friend's house in Fenwick, Delaware and he sexually abused me that weekend. My mother reported this and she was told to bring us to Delaware for a forensic interview. We interviewed with a man with over 25 years

of experience in interviewing children and with the Detectives and District Attorney watching through a one-sided glass. Following the interview, they felt that my father should be charged with rape. However, Judge Byrnes had the DA for Baltimore County call Delaware's DA and let them know that this was just a contentious custody case where the mother was trying to alienate the father. Delaware dropped the case, but the forensic interviewer drove three hours to Baltimore County to testify that he believed my brother and I. However, Judge Byrnes stated that he was not qualified, and that same day told the Detective from Baltimore County that he disagreed with her belief that we were being abused.

Judge Byrnes, Laurel Reese and Katie Killeen put my brother and I through hell and back. We met with Judge Byrnes several times and he lectured us on what happened to Pinocchio when he lied. Fortunately, for my brother and I, my mother was able to obtain help from Child Justice, who arranged for top notch pro bono attorneys. These attorneys listened to us, believed us and fought for us. They had to go around Judge Byrnes, Laurel Reese and Katie Killeen to help us. These inexperienced players were ready to give my father full custody of us. These attorneys brokered a deal with my father's attorney where my mother would have full custody and my father would be on supervised visits every other Sunday for 5 hours and in return my father would have his years of arrearages in child support erased and would not have to pay child support again until January 2009. I note that he never did resume child support.

This arrangement began in January 2004 and in April 2004 my mother received a letter from Judge Byrnes directing her to bring my brother and I to his courtroom. When we arrived my father was there, as well. Judge Byrnes entered and went directly to my brother asking him if he had said good morning to his father. When my brother said no, Judge Byrnes grabbed both of his arms, lifting him in the air and shaking him back and forth viciously. With my brother hysterically crying he took both of us to his chambers and continued to berate us for not being nice to our father. My brother was left with physical bruising on both arms for weeks. My mother filed a complaint against Judge Byrnes and he suddenly retired.

My father stopped all visitation with us in May 2004 as he did not want to continue paying for his supervisor. My brother and I have never heard from him again and we both had our names changed upon turning 18. We have tried to put all this trauma that the court and other members of the court put us through behind us, but it will always be there.

This is a bill that must pass to protect all children. Judges, children's attorneys, and custody evaluators that are not trained in domestic violence and child abuse should not

be allowed to be involved in any custody cases. It is unconscionable that children who cry out for help from our courts are further abused by the judges, attorneys and custody evaluators. These judges and their players need to be educated regarding domestic violence and child abuse. Without this they are not equipped to make decisions regarding abuse or custody. Thank you.