

Hello – my name is Hera McLeod. I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill (SB0675) titled “Child Custody – Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence – Training for Judges and Child’s Counsel”. About little over a year ago, I testified in front of the Maryland working committee on Family Court Reform. I explained how my son Prince was murdered by his father when he was only 15-months old. This murder didn’t happen suddenly and could have been prevented had the Family Court process worked.

Elements of the same things that occurred in my case, though many dismiss what happened to my son as an extreme, happen to children every day. Parents with children in need of assistance come before judges every day, pleading for the system to protect their children. If the parent has been abused, they likely don’t present well. Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is what I acutely suffered from when I came to family court, can result in a victim presenting as though *they* are part of the problem. Judges who aren’t trained in how a victim presents could dismiss him/her as hysterical.

Before the judge in my case sentenced my son to unsupervised visits with the man who would eventually kill him, he told me that I would need to deal with my son’s father because I chose to have a baby with him. And that my son would need to come back to me with cigarette burns on his back before the case reached to the level that would require continued supervised visits. I wish my son *had* come back to me with cigarette burns, because instead he came back to me in a body bag.

I spent years hating the judge in my son’s case, and in many ways blaming him as an accomplice in my son’s murder. But what I have come to realize with some distance is that the judge was a victim as well. He was tasked with making a fatal decision that had a devastating ripple effect through my life, my family, and his own. He has to live with the decision he made and the impact that decision has on his own legacy. In addition to the tragedy of my son, he was also put into a position without the proper tools at his disposal to make the best decision.

What I’m asking you to consider is – what is a child’s life worth to you? If you knew that providing education for judges that would give them the tools needed to protect kids was possible, why wouldn’t you just do it?

I’ve heard some argue that only a small number of children have died. This argument tears at my soul because *my* child was one of the ones who died as a result of this broken system. But I am not writing in hopes that my support of this bill will somehow bring my son back – I know it will not. What I want you to understand is that education like this bill is suggesting will protect the kids who will come after my son. And while there are many children who die as a result of poor decisions made in Family Court, there are many injuries we don’t end up seeing in the media – children forced into the custody of parents who will sexually and physically assault them or emotionally abuse them.

You might think this isn't *your* problem, because your child will not be the subject of a family court war. But ask you to imagine a day when a child who *has* been in the system comes knocking at your door, asking to take your child to the prom. This is a burden and responsibility for us all. Please consider the benefit judicial education specific to these specialized cases could do to improve the overall health and safety to our children.

Sincerely,

Hera A. McLeod