

March 24, 2021

The Honorable Janelle Bynum, Chair
The Honorable Ron Noble, Vice-Chair
The Honorable Karin Power, Vice-Chair
House Committee on Judiciary

Re: Supporting HB 2825 – Treating survivors of domestic abuse with more dignity and fairness.

Dear Chair Bynum and Members of the Committee,

My name is Zuleyma Figueroa. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 2825 and to share my story.

“Good teacher.” This is how my students and their parents would describe me in the schools that I have worked in. I was a teacher for over 15 years in bilingual programs, K-12. I have always had a passion to teach and serve the youth in our community. Indeed, I was happy. I had a house, a nice car, wonderful job, friends, and a supportive family.

It was winter 2007 when I met a woman that I fell in love with. Things were going well for a couple of years. Then I started to notice that my income was not enough to cover the life of luxury that my partner wanted. She was buying expensive cars and having parties every weekend. One minute we were struggling financially, the next minute her pockets seemed to be full. Eventually I discovered that she was heavily involved in her family’s drug dealing business.

I did not realize at the time the degree of psychological manipulation that was being inflicted upon me and all the tactics that she used to control my life. She gave me constant reassurance that everything was going fine, while slowly sowing seeds of doubt, rocking my confidence, and breaking down my judgment. Domestic violence can take many forms and it was not fully apparent to me at that time that I was being completely brainwashed. I later came to learn that these methods are known as gaslighting.

When I found out she was selling drugs, I was so worn down and exhausted from all the lies, she managed to convince me that it wasn’t a big deal, and that I would never be at risk. Reluctantly, I began to get involved in this lifestyle in a desperate attempt to keep my partner happy. I lost my identity and I started to be very codependent on my partner. I stopped living my life and started living her life instead. I stopped seeing my family and friends. The world that surrounded me belonged only to her.

In June 2010, I was caught selling drugs and went to jail for three months. I lost my teaching and administrative license. I was devastated. I was working on starting my life over when she turned up at my front door asking me to let her in my life again. I said no and I asked her to leave. She began stalking me and sending people to my house to spy on me. Then she came to my house and put a gun to my head. She told me that if I said anything, or called the police,

that she would make me or one of my sisters disappear in an instant. I was terrified! She had told me many times before that her brothers have been known to disappear people.

This woman took over my house, my possessions, and my teaching pension. She used my name to open an automotive shop as a front for selling drugs. My life was a living hell. I became her maid and was careful to never say anything to upset my abuser. I wasn't allowed to have a phone. I considered suicide because my life was unbearable. I was so scared for my life and my family that I would have done almost anything she said.

Eventually, the DEA searched the auto shop, and I was arrested and charged with possession and delivery of drugs. Again, my ex seemed to have escaped justice.

When I was in prison, I met other women who had been victims of domestic abuse before committing their crimes. My eyes began to open wide to the deeper issues that send people to prison. A system that ignores these issues only increases the trauma that abuse survivors experience. In prison, a lot of women just shut down and switch into survival mode. Over time, I began to put all the pieces back together and heal. I made it through by the grace of God and my resiliency. Not everyone is as fortunate.

I would like to close by taking a moment to acknowledge survivors of abuse. People who are incarcerated all over this nation, who have been victims long before they ever thought of victimizing another human being. And people who are silently facing this tragic epidemic of domestic violence in their life, every day. Who may not be in the justice system, but live in their own hopeless hell of a prison, day in and day out. May we acknowledge them now.

I urge you to vote **yes** on HB 2825.

Thank You.

Sincerely,

Zuleyma Figueroa