

February 8, 2023

Representative Courtney Neron

Chair

House Committee on Education

900 Court St. NE, Hearing Room D

Salem Oregon 97301

Chair Neron, Vice Chair Hudson, Vice Chair Wright, Members of the committee,

My name is Gayle Huwe. I am the mother of Andy Huwe and of Elena Huwe who this bill was written for. I want to explain why I believe this Bill is necessary. Please bear with me on this lengthy explanation.

When our communities were shut down during COVID-19, I don't think that anyone had any idea of what kind of repercussions there would be. Unfortunately for my family, one of the damaging effects was the harm on my children's mental health.

Elena was always a social butterfly. She was not a "Popular" girl, but she was outgoing and had many friends, and her friendships were very necessary to her state of well-being. When she was a baby, she was a very easy child to take care of. She was not demanding, and she was quiet. She was happy, and although she didn't say a lot, you could see it in her face that there was a lot going on that she didn't verbalize. When her sister came along, Elena seemed to relish the role of a big sister and tried to do everything she could to make her sister happy by always giving in to what her demanding sister wanted. One day, I pulled Elena aside and told her that it was a nice thing she was doing for her sister, but that Elena's desires were important too and she shouldn't be afraid to tell Holly that she wanted to play something different than what her sister wanted to do at the time and that they would take turns playing the games they both wanted to play. That is what it seemed, helped Elena find her voice. She is not afraid of expressing her desires, and her issues. This doesn't mean that Elena didn't experience problems.

She often struggled in school. At one point, I pulled her and her brother Ben out of school to homeschool and to help them catch up. She told me later that she was having a hard time because she missed her friends. As a parent looking back, I can see how "cutting her off from her friends" by keeping her home, was harmful to her.

When I finally allowed her to go back to school, she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It was then that she was diagnosed with ADD, and a bit later we had been informed by one of her friends, that she had begun cutting. We did not take the cutting as seriously as we probably should have. We felt like Elena was easily influenced by her friends and she hung around some girls that had emotional problems and "cut". The school that she attended with her brothers seemed to have an issue where certain behaviors were considered the "cool thing". (For example, we were told that "all" the kids cut. It was no biggie. And

the kids would come home from school EVERY DAY talking about which person had come out as gay, or bi, or trans to the point you would think there was no one left in their school who was straight.) We sat Elena down and talked to her about the self-harm. We told her that we didn't do things like that and if she was going to be doing it, she could no longer hang out with certain friends. It was also around this time that Elena told me that she was attracted to girls. Again, I didn't take it seriously because I thought it was just an influence from her school.

We moved to Oregon around the time she was to begin High School. The summer after we moved, but before she began her freshman year, Elena met someone on a Facebook page. Though they had never met in person, she quickly became infatuated with him. My other 3 kids told us the kinds of things this person had been telling her and how he was influencing her. He was a narcissist who blamed everything on her. He would verbally abuse her and then apologize and place all the guilt and blame on her. He told my youngest daughter to go kill herself, and on and on. Elena was unable to separate herself from him, so we ended up removing all electronic devices she had access too.

We noticed a pattern with her. When she did not have access to being online, she was such a delight to be around. She was happy and active with the family. She spent time with us, laughed and talked with us. She would hang out with her siblings and go walking around town with them. After some time, we gave the electronics back to her. But it wasn't long before she became sullen, and angry all the time. She closed herself and spent all the time alone in her room. We took her phone and realized she had taken back up with this person and we removed the devices from her again until a time we felt like we could trust her with them again, and the cycle started again. This went on for a couple of years.

In February of 2020, Elena brought home a girl from school and told us that she was not going back home. This girl was being tossed around between parents who did not want her, and she was embroiled in abuse. We became emergency foster parents and Ori came to live with us. Ori was extremely traumatized. She had night terrors every night, she had extreme panic attacks, she suffered from bulimia, and cutting and thoughts/attempts of suicide, she was forever in the state of fight or flight. We learned all about having a safety plan and having to lock up all our medications and sharp objects, such as our kitchen knives and scissors.

In the 3 months that she had lived with us, Elena put herself in the "parenting" roll. She did everything in her power to help Ori, often talking her down without even notifying us that there was an issue. Elena had resumed her cutting before we moved to Oregon, and every time she had issue with this boy, she would cut, but now that Ori was living with us, Elena had for the most part put it aside. Her reasoning was that she was doing everything in her power to keep Ori from doing it and if she cut, she thought that was giving Ori permission to do it too.

Ori lived with us through the end of May when the State took her away to place her in an intensive group situation. But the trauma of dealing with her took its toll on the entire family, but mostly it took its toll on both of my girls. After Ori left, Elena had no reason to keep herself from cutting anymore and resumed with a vengeance.

The following September 2020, our county was allowed to have students return to school in person. Elena was very excited to be around her friends again and be involved in the clubs at school. But. . .

Right before school started, Elena again, got involved with this online guy. She broke up with her best friend/girlfriend at this guy's leading. Her girlfriend was understandably upset and didn't treat Elena very well whenever they would see each other. Unfortunately, they had some classes together and when Elena started school, she started having panic attacks and her anxiety was off the charts. Elena would call me after only being in school for a period or two, telling me that she couldn't breathe and needed to come home.

This became an everyday occurrence. After this happened for a couple of weeks, I went to the principal of the school to talk about options for her. He wasn't very helpful.

During this time, we also found out that the house we were living in was being sold and we needed to find another place to live. One thing about Wallowa County is that there are LOTS of people who need a rental, and there are very few rentals. We have a large family and so we couldn't just live in any house that came available. The only house we were able to find that was big enough for our family, was in a different town at the other end of the county. But the stress of having to find a pretty much "non-existent" house, and then moving, breaking up with her girlfriend, being manipulated by this narcissistic boyfriend, fighting with her family, was just too much for her. Not too long after we moved into the new house, we found her very lethargic in her room. We found out that Elena had taken a large handful of medication in the hopes that she would overdose and end her life.

Only the quick thinking of my EMT husband was able to get her to the hospital to have her stomach pumped. Crisis hotline was called, councilors from the mental health field came to the hospital, Safety Plans were again put into place. I wish I could say this was the end of it.

Unfortunately, despite our efforts, Elena would try to take her life two more times in the following two weeks, and then once again within the two weeks after that. Each time she would try a different drug cocktail, by upping the amount of prescription drugs she was able to find. Elena now has liver damage caused by overdosing on one of the medications, and we still don't know the extent of damage that may show up later in life because of the other medications she took. And as a reward for our efforts, CSD was called on us for a possible Neglect situation.

When I went back to the school, again, needing some help for my daughter that now had been out of school for over a month, told them about the attempts at suicide, the only options offered to me was to keep her in school, as is, or to put her in the alternative school. Neither of the options helped us, or her mental state.

Since that time, we have all, as a family, been on a roller coaster ride with her and her mental state. We feel like we are walking on eggshells because the slightest thing can trigger her and send her back into a tail spin. She has attempted suicide several times since then. She has been in and out of the hospital, she has gone through numerous counselors, and countless medications. She even spent a few days at a mental hospital in Lewiston, ID. It was here they were able to diagnose her with borderline personality disorder. Her diagnosis is the reason she stayed for two days.

After her first suicide attempts, and a disappointing lack of help from the schools, my son started researching information and found out about Adi's Act and how it was supposed to help those students who were considered high risk, such as those students in the LGBTQ+ community. I know earlier in this testimony I mentioned that she told me she liked girls, and I thought it was a phase brought on by the

popularity of it at her school. But I tell you now that she is an out, loud, and proud lesbian, and did not try to hide it at her new school. (Side note: This online “boyfriend” she had was a Trans Masc.) Elena is one of the “High Risk” students that Adi’s Act was written for. I admit, when I heard about Adi’s Act and how it was required to be fully implemented in the schools by July of 2020, and when we went through the first of her attempts of suicide in October of 2020 when we were BEGGING for any help, any lifeline, and the school did NOT offer it, I was REALLY MAD. But when I read Adi’s Act, I didn’t feel like it really did much of anything for families. All it did was offer information on how to get help. Like giving us phone numbers for the crisis line, or a flyer that tells us signs to look for if your child might be wanting to end their life. None of that information would really have been helpful to us as we already had the crisis number on speed dial from when Ori lived with us, and she was already meeting with a counselor, and we knew about how to set up a safety plan, etc. etc. I am glad that something good was able to come out of Adi’s tragic death with the fact that it raises awareness for students who are at a higher risk for mental health issues, but it wouldn’t have gone far enough for us to know what to do about it.

It has been two and a half years since her first attempt and we are JUST NOW in a situation where we feel like she is getting the help she needs, and we are able to be a part of the process in giving and gaining information on what we can do as parents to help her. We still walk on eggshells around her, and we still have to deal with those all too often times when she is extremely emotional, and heading down that dark path again, but at least we have some measure of hope. If we had access to this kind of help three years ago when we were first experiencing it, she would have had the help earlier, the right kind of people supporting her, maybe we would be closer to the end of her needing the help, instead of relatively at the beginning of it.

We as parents have tried to be as proactive as we can be, but I can’t help but think of the students who do not have a supportive base, who feel like there is no one in the world who would care if they were to live or die, how many of them might be saved if only they had the right kind of support? I was a teacher in the past, and I know how much teachers need the support of parents to give the student the best education and the kind of support they need, but it seems like school life, and home life are just two separate things that will always be separated. But they are not separate because whatever happens in one, will ALWAYS affect the other. Parents and schools need the ability to come together to support each other, so that they in turn, can support the kids and we can only do that if we are given the tools, we need to be successful. In this case, we need to have more than just signs to look for. We need an In Place, plan of action so we know which steps to move to next. Where to begin, someone to talk to who has experience with this and knows what to do to help.

Thank you for listening to our story. Every time I have to tell our story, it brings up all the feelings of helplessness we experienced, and I pray that at some point, something positive will come from this.

Sincerely,

Gayle Huwe

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