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PAGE 6
HB 555

Letter to the committee for HB 555:

Heidi's abuse began prior to her marriage; her abuser was physically aggressive despite her protests of discomfort. He spent all of his time with her and isolated her from friends. On their wedding night he became sexually aggressive with her regardless of her distress. Heidi experienced repeated rapes throughout her marriage and both children were conceived as a result of rape. Her husband was physically violent including slamming doors, punching walls, abusing pets and pounding on his own head even in the presence of the children. These acts were intimidating and terrifying for Heidi and she learned quickly to try and placate him at all costs. He monitored her phone calls and conversations with others and would not leave her side when out in public. He even controlled what underwear she wore. He told her repeatedly her body belonged to him and he could do as he pleased with her sexually. He submitted her to long periods of silence which were broken by angry outbursts.

Heidi learned that to survive she had to shut down and try at all costs to keep him happy. She learned to read his body language and expressions to the point that he could control her without words. Because of the repeated criticism, control, physical violence, rapes and isolation it was impossible for Heidi to stand up for herself in the presence of her husband. Even after leaving her abuser, being in his presence would trigger Heidi back to those times of abuse. This made it virtually insurmountable for Heidi to advocate for the best interests of herself and her children. This was all compounded by the fact that the mental health professionals Heidi saw for her parenting evaluation refused to accept her reports of abuse despite documentation of PTSD stemming from her abusive marriage. Heidi was seen by two male psychologists who dismissed and even ridiculed her detailed descriptions of the abuse throughout her seven years of marriage. This included ignoring obvious red flags of sexual abuse in the children.

The judge on her case ignored testimony by nationally recognized experts in domestic violence who verified evidence of her abuse as well as testimony by her ex himself who acknowledged he was abusive in their marriage. These experiences on top of the ongoing repeated abuse and control by her ex would make mandatory mediation unsafe and traumatic for Heidi. She would not be able to advocate for her safety or the safety of her children in the direct presence of her abuser.

Being in the presence of their abuser puts domestic violence survivors and their children at risk for unsafe decisions and poor outcomes for their future. Their protection is of the utmost priority in order to improve the long term goals for safety and growth. Protection against mandatory mediation will also support survivors, like Heidi, who fail to be safeguarded by the system designed to advocate for them.

Chris Herb

Aunt of Heidi Hendershott