

## Written Testimony of Genevieve Meyer Re: Child Marriage

Dear Committee members,

I was 2 years old the first time I was sexually violated. Of course, I don't remember it, my mother told me about it. She explained that since this had happened to me, I was now damaged, and my self-esteem and value began to erode. I was violated by 5 more individuals by the time I met my first husband at the age of 14.

In the fall of 1994, I had moved from OH where I was staying in foster care to southern CA and back to my mother. We had been living in OH when I entered foster care, but my mother moved out of state. Due to some paperwork issues that I do not understand I wasn't able to be enrolled in school and my foster family wasn't able to get health insurance for me or any assistance. The solution was to return me to my mother. I was supposed to be monitored and enrolled in school upon arriving at my mother's house. None of this happened and I was sent to work long days with my abusive stepfather. My respite during my time was long walks in canyons by our mobile home park.

I met my husband who was 42 one day when I walked by his trailer to exit the park to the canyons. It started with small talk, then compliments, then "hey I want to show you something". I wasn't in school; I didn't have peers and friends and I tried to not be at my abusive & chaotic home as much as possible. He offered a place to hide out and was a "friend" to me. Then things progressed into, comments on my beauty, that I aroused him and touching. My mother discovered that I was spending time at his home and

called the police. He was arrested and I was interviewed by a police officer. I told the police officer that I was supposed to have a caseworker checking on me and that I was not in school and my home life was still just as bad as ever. I asked him for help and was told that there was nothing that he could do. A few days later my mother told me that what had happened was my fault and I had ruined this man's life. He would lose his children and go to jail if I didn't fix what I had done and marry him. My husband and my mother drug me to 4 different states to find one that would marry us. It was more difficult because I was not pregnant.

On May 11, 1995, at the age of 15, I married for the first time. I showered in a campground shower and put on a faded polka dot cotton dress that a church lady had handed down to me a few years before. It was the nicest dress I owned. I didn't carry any flowers, only fear, and shame. I was all alone with this man. No family accompanied me on this trip from southern CA to Mississippi. No one ever asked me if I wanted to get married. I cried most of the way home and my new husband told me that I need to toughen up and that life is not fair. He reminded me that my mother had signed me over to him because she didn't want to deal with me anymore. I was alone and had only him. He kept reminding me that he was "helping me" and that someday when I was older and more mature, I would see that. He also would say "do you want a candy little girl" every time we stopped for gas on the way home and other degrading comments. In that week I gained a husband, lost my virginity and most of my soul.

We returned home and I settled into "married life". I made an appointment at a local high school to see if I could enroll. They said my "guardian" would have to enroll me. I had already missed so much school and felt so embarrassed, dirty, and disgusting that I

was too afraid to try to go to regular school. How would I explain who I was? About my situation? What kind of questions would I be asked?

I soon learned that my “self-employed spouse” didn’t work much. He spent his days smoking weed and drinking himself to the point of passing out most nights. We struggled to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads. I learned how long you can go before they really will evict you, how to get along without utilities, and tried to figure out additional income streams very quickly. As soon as I would old enough, I attended an alternative school to have a work permit that my husband signed for me. I worked as much as I could at a fast-food restaurant and helped my husband with his “landscaping” business to try and stay afloat. I ended up dropping out of school and just working because I would come home to anger and jealous allegations that I would find someone my age and leave him.

I left my marriage at the age of 19 and struggled to get a divorce until I was 22. I struggled to support myself without even a high school education and struggled with symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety so crimpling at times I couldn’t function as well as homelessness.

When I was 20, I had my first child and it was not the biological child of my husband. When she was two, he tried to sue for full custody and take her away from me. Since she was born while we were still legally married (because I didn’t have the resources or requirements to get a divorce) he was awarded parental rights to my daughter. For a decade I had to co-parent with this man who verbally, emotionally & psychologically abused myself and my daughter. I lived with kidnapping threats from him and constant

unsubstantiated calls to the department of child services. He gave up when my daughter was about 10 years old and both of us have been in treatment for years.

I thought that all these horrible things that happened to me were just a fluke. I was the only one. For years I hid my story and my shame and just tried to move on with my life. Once I stepped out of the darkness and shared my story many other ladies contacted me and said this happened to me too. In the short few months since I have gone public with my story over a hundred women have contacted me. Today I have 28 women in a group that we established to talk, share and support each other. I have heard stories even more horrible than mine. A 14-year-old was forced to get married to cover up an incest pregnancy. A mother lying about her daughter's age and saying that she was pregnant to get her married and so much more.

I have protected my children and have never let anything like this happen to them and I believe that many parents do. But not all parents protect their children and we need laws in place to protect them when parents fail to do so. We also think that services like law enforcement and family services can stop these types of things from happening. I have personally experienced the failure of these systems and now work in the field and see them fail all the time. These systems cannot protect children if the laws do not support them.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony. Please think of my story and many others when voting on whether to end child marriage in Kansas.

Most cordially,

Genevieve Meyer, MBA (Prideaux)

