

Thank you, Chairman Barker, for the opportunity to address the committee as a proponent of HB 2422. I asked Representative Clayton to introduce this bill because I am a child bride. It seems fitting that, on today, the 2nd anniversary of my divorce, I am before you testifying on this bill.

On November 3, 2006, I went to my school in rural Alabama to turn in a research paper, and then immediately checked out of school to drive to Marianna, Florida to get married. I was 17 and a senior in high school. My now ex-husband was 21. The circumstances surrounding our marriage weighed heavily on our deeply held Mormon religious beliefs. My mom believed that she was doing what was best for me. That day, despite having shared legal custody with my dad, she consented to my marriage without his knowledge or consent. It was several months before my dad made the discovery. Imagine his emotions at being robbed of the opportunity to watch his daughter get married. Years later, my dad still struggles with his lack of ability to protect me at that time.

What happened to me over the next 12 years is nothing short of a horror story. I dealt with abuse in many forms, lies and deceit. In 2018, following an act of violence against me, in front of our children, I finally let him walk out the door. In that moment I felt free for the first time since we were wed in 2006. At the same time, I felt immense fear. I had never been on my own before. Here I was without a college degree, in the middle of nowhere, with 4 children. I found myself discovering for the first time how to check the oil in my car, change a tire, mow the lawn, manage my budget, and many other basic tasks that people usually know how to do by 29. For the first time in my entire life I was alone. Over the next several months, I rebuilt myself and invested all my spare time in my kids.

2 years later and I have finally discovered who I am. I have sold my hobby farm and moved to town. I am in school and working to build a better life for my kids and myself.

Getting here hasn't been easy, but I know that my journey has been easier than that of many other women in similar circumstances.

The fact of the matter is that according to Unchained At Last, an organization dedicated to ending child marriage, 70-80% of marriages before age 18 end in divorce and 77% of these marriages involve minor females being married to adult men. Between the years 2000 and 2010, 2500 minors were married in our state. 50% of girls married before age 19 are likely to drop out of high school and 4 times less likely to complete college compared to their non-married peers. These women often find themselves in a cycle of poverty and abuse.

In 2006 when I complied with my marriage, I was not mature enough to make that decision. I was thinking of the short term: no curfew, signing my own permission slips, and the freedom to make my own schedule. I wasn't prepared for the long-term effects of that marriage. The last month has been a whirlwind of emotion as I have replayed those 12 years. This bill and my testimony have involved deep contemplation on trauma. I wouldn't be here before you today if I didn't think it was important. If I can stop this from happening to another woman, it will have been worth it. Thank you again for the opportunity to address this committee about this important issue.