

Good Afternoon, and thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony.

When I testified before the Appropriations Committee, I did so as an advocate for those suffering from mental trauma and anguish, and as a person financing a student's higher education. Today, though, I come before you in my most important role, and one which many of you share: that of a parent.

As a parent, nothing is more important than your child's health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. Even in the throes of adolescence, when your child is at their least communicative, you develop a sixth sense for when something is out of order. Within seconds of asking your child how they're doing, you know if they're being burdened by something, even if they don't openly acknowledge as much.

That's what happened the weekend of October 11, 2019, when I visited my son Cameron for Salisbury University's Parent Weekend. Even though he assured me that everything was normal, it was clear to me, as his mother, that he was out of sorts. Sure enough, by the following Monday, he was texting me saying that he feared for his safety and needed to leave campus. That's when it emerged that Cameron was experiencing all kinds of racial animus at Salisbury - from having the n-word shouted at him in common areas to the appearance of sexually- and racially-charged graffiti.

The events that followed are well-documented in the public record, including Cameron's withdrawal from Salisbury and the University's refusal to consider fearing for one's safety as an "extenuating circumstance." As I said in my committee testimony, nobody - *nobody* - should feel compelled to place themselves - or, heaven forbid, their *child* - in perceived danger over financial obligations. Yet that is what the University administration, through their words and actions, sought to do - an injustice that this bill rightly seeks to prevent from recurring.

In my professional life, I interact routinely with mental health practitioners and patients, and I see firsthand how our society ignores, disregards, or outright dismisses their struggles simply because they lack the visibility of a wheelchair, a crutch, or a cast. Many suffer in silence for years out of a belief that you can just "will away" debilitating symptoms of anxiety, depression, or other conditions such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia. I mention these conditions by name because they often emerge during late adolescence and early adulthood - the same years when many attend college.

To be clear, what we are discussing are indeed "extenuating circumstances": circumstances that make it impossible for a student to attend class, to engage in coursework, and to be a functioning part of the university community. I applaud this body for its past work to destigmatize mental illness and study how best to address mental health in our state's university system. This bill is a crucial next step toward making sure that our institutes of higher education are a safe and supportive place for our young people to grow as intellectuals and as citizens.

Thank you again for taking the time to consider my testimony, and thanks again to Delegate Henson for her tireless work in this area. As a parent, as one who interacts in the mental health space, and as a proud, lifelong Marylander, I look forward to seeing the successful passage of this bill into law.