

My name is Hera McLeod. I am writing in support of Senate Bill 336 (Family Law – Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Training). A little over nine years ago, my 15-month-old son Prince McLeod was murdered on his fourth unsupervised visit with his father. This murder occurred after over a year in Family Court in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Critics and people who've fought obtaining civil rights for children for decades will try and dismiss my case as "an extreme example," but what my case is – is an example of all the things that have gone wrong and continue to go wrong in Maryland Family Courts.

I support this bill because one of the most devastating parts of my case occurred because when the custody evaluator, who was appropriately concerned for my son's safety, recommended that my son's murderer obtain a psychological evaluation (because she, herself didn't have the training required to conduct the psychological evaluation herself). As a result, the court allowed my son's father to choose his own psychologist. Instead of choosing someone who was licensed to evaluate adults, he chose someone who only had a license in school psychology and was therefore NOT licensed to evaluate adults outside of a school setting.

The court never pulled her license, which would have verified that she wasn't qualified to evaluate an adult and give a custody opinion based on her evaluation. As a result of a school psychologist stating it was her belief that my son's father was suffering from only "mild depression," the judge lifted supervised visitation.

On his fourth unsupervised visit with his father, my toddler Prince was brutally suffocated. His father used the Maryland courts to obtain access in the elaborately pre-meditated murder of an innocent child. He'd taken over half a million dollars in life insurance out of Prince prior to the murder – something a qualified evaluator would likely have expressed concern over given the testimony and his history as a suspect in two previous murders involving life insurance policies.

If the custody evaluator in my son's case had been licensed (or had specialized training she could cite) to give an opinion on psychological functioning, the court wouldn't have needed to outsource – which ultimately opened the door for the corruption that occurred. While the therapist who testified in my son's case was later reprimanded by the Virginia Board of Psychology for practicing outside of her license (and placed on probation), that sanction came too late for my son.

When my son died, I spent a few minutes alone with him before I closed the casket for the last time. I told him I was sorry that I couldn't protect him – and that even though he wasn't the first child for whom a broken system couldn't save – I would make it one of my life's missions to ensure he was one of the last.

I've spent the last nine years since his death advocating for Family Court Reform and Children's Rights. I've spoken to both fathers and mothers, heartbroken that they must turn their children over to an abusive co-parent. In each of these cases, I see common threads that remind me of what I saw while I tried to protect my own child.

Most of these cases won't end up in newspapers across the globe like mine did, but there are so many children that we don't hear about in the news that suffer life altering abuse. I'm hopeful that you will

consider my son – those who came before him – and those who continue to come after him and pass this child protecting legislation.

Sincerely,
Hera A. McLeod