



Prince, at his home in Gaithersburg, MD – two weeks before he was murdered by his father (during one of the first, court ordered unsupervised visits).

My name is Hera McLeod and I'm writing in support of SB0365, "Family Law – Child Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Trainings".

In October of 2012, my son Prince was murdered by his father. His murder came on the heels of a year in family court where my attorneys presented terrifying evidence pointing to the dangerousness of Prince's father Joaquin Rams. Our custody evaluator heard testimony from several witnesses from Rams' life to include a Virginia police officer, the grandmother of his older son, and one of his ex-girlfriends – who all believed he routinely abused his older son and that he'd killed two people prior, in hopes of profiting from life insurance death benefits.

Our custody evaluator understood that Joaquin was dangerous, and believed he was suffering from psychological issues that would pose a danger to Prince; however, when she got on the stand, Rams' attorney tore apart her testimony. The attorney pointed out that the evaluator didn't have the appropriate training or credentials that would qualify her to assess his psychological functioning or to evaluate his dangerousness.

Our courts often rely on custody evaluators to assess the dangerousness of a parent - yet don't give them the tools to stand behind their assessments. Having evaluators gives the court a false sense that someone has investigated claims and evaluated evidence. Without giving these hard-working professionals the tools that they need to authentically carry out what they are charged to do, we're rendering them useless and a waste of taxpayer dollars. Because all it takes its one attorney to question

their qualifications before the court realizes they need to outsource and add someone *with* the proper training and qualifications to evaluate.

Imagine how it must've felt for that evaluator in my son's case when she learned he'd been murdered. She, along with many others in the Montgomery County, MD court must live with wondering whether there was something they could have done to save Prince's life. And in her case, I sincerely hope that she knows how much I appreciate that she tried. My heart goes out to her in the knowledge that when her credibility was challenged, she'd been unable to point to job training she'd received that would've allowed her to stand behind her findings.

This past Thursday during the Senate Judicial Committee session, Judge Kathleen Dumais presented opposition to the bill. In her testimony she referenced my son's case, arguing that since the provision for training and standards for Child Custody Evaluators hadn't yet been included in the rules committee back in 2012 – a child in the same circumstances as Prince *would* be protected today. But given that we've yet to pass training and qualifications for Custody Evaluators *in statute*, allow me to point out an obvious flaw in Judge Dumais' logic.

If a case with the exact same circumstances as Prince's came before the court today, and:

- All the evaluators with the knowledge necessary to render an informed opinion on the veracity of child abuse allegations happened to be busy,
- OR*
- The judge simply decided they preferred an evaluator without qualifications, even if qualified alternatives were available,

the status quo would also allow a judge to appoint someone without basic qualifications or experience on the issue the presented – expecting them to render a professional opinion on something they have no experience with. And in the majority of Maryland family court cases, the judges base their order on the custody evaluators report.

This loophole doesn't protect children. Most Americans wouldn't be willing to take the chance that a hospital director could allow someone, who didn't have a medical degree and wasn't even sure where the heart was in the body, to lead your open-heart surgery. So, we shouldn't assume allowing children will be protected based on an *optional* suggestion that judges appoint someone qualified.

I would rather the judge *not* appoint an evaluator if they're unable to find someone qualified to render an informed opinion, and instead have the judge solely rely on their knowledge of the law and the child abuse training ***the statute*** requires them to take.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this bill. I've been advocating for child protection for over a decade. Many parents who understand these issues as deeply as I do, are silenced because they are still in court trying to fight for their bills. Sometimes, I envy them because that means their children are still alive. But over the years, I've come to believe that Prince chose me as a mother for a reason. He knew that I wouldn't be silent about what is happening to our nation's children. In addition to advocating in the memory of my dear Prince, who never had the chance to grow old – I am also writing on behalf of the parents who cannot speak out and the children currently being forced to have access with an abusive parent.

Please understand that for many children, family court is their last chance for safety and protection. I encourage you to vote in favor of SB0365/HB0405 because I truly believe it will add an essential layer of protection for Maryland's children – and it could be just the thing that saves the life of the next child. Please feel free to reach out should you have any questions about this legislation. I'd be happy to further illustrate why this is urgent and necessary.

Sincerely,

Hera McLeod (Prince's Mama)

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