

July 17th, 2020, is a day I will never forget. My husband, Max, and I had been married for just over a year, and we were overjoyed as we prepared to welcome our first child that November. We had lovingly finished setting up the nursery, reviewed parenting advice, and chosen the perfect name for our baby girl: Ava Petit.

Today, I share this not only as a mother, but also as a perinatal mental health counselor who now works with families navigating pregnancy and loss.

But on that day, our world was turned upside down. I contacted my physician because something felt wrong—I suspected I might be having contractions. Shortly after that call, my water broke. We rushed to Anne Arundel Medical Center, holding onto hope that things might be okay.

When we arrived, we received the devastating news no parent should ever have to hear: Ava had a 0% chance of survival because I was only 20 weeks along.

Our nightmare had just begun. We were admitted to the hospital, knowing that the worst day of our lives was ahead of us. Compassionate nurses came by to counsel us on the next steps. We were bombarded with information and forced to make rapid, heartbreaking decisions.

We had to decide what to do with Ava's remains. Could we afford a funeral? Would we want one? Would we need grief counseling? These were unimaginable choices for grieving parents to make in such a short time. Imagine having this experience and not being able to care for your child's remains due to financial constraints.

In my work now, I sit with families in these exact moments. I see firsthand how trauma, shock, and grief impact decision-making, and how critical it is that families are supported, not burdened, during this time.

Fortunately, my husband and I had the resources to cremate our daughter and scatter her ashes beneath a beautiful white poplar tree in our yard. We placed a simple plaque there, a lasting tribute to Ava, letting her know she was real, loved, and forever in our hearts.

However, not every family receives that same level of recognition or support. Acknowledgment of stillborn children should not be dependent on a family's financial means. When systems, including our state, fail to support families in honoring their children, it can compound grief and contribute to long-term mental health challenges.

Every year in Maryland, over 350 families face this same devastating reality. Many are forced to make impossible decisions because of financial constraints. From a mental health perspective, these barriers increase the risk of trauma, depression, and complicated grief during an already vulnerable time.

Imagine being unable to afford the burial or cremation of your child because of unexpected expenses. Imagine not being able to access the grief counseling you so desperately need

because it's simply too expensive. These parents are already enduring the most heartbreaking moment of their lives; they should not have to suffer further due to a lack of support.

I am here today to ask you to support SB 356. This bill would provide critical financial assistance to grieving parents, ensuring they are not burdened with making impossible decisions during the worst moments of their lives.

This is not only about financial support, it is also about acknowledgment. It is about recognizing that these children existed, that they were loved, and that their families deserve to grieve with dignity and support.

By passing this bill, you can make a meaningful difference for families across Maryland. No parent should ever have to choose between their grief and their finances. Ava's memory, and the memory of every child lost too soon, deserves better.

Thank you for your time, compassion, and commitment to supporting Maryland families. I urge you to support this bill.

Sincerely,
Lauren Petit