

Testimony for HB 38

Marissa Gibson

Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on a proposed bill that is near and dear to my heart. My name is Marissa Gibson and I am a detective with a Sheriff's Office here in Central Ohio. I understand and respect that we all have different opinions on what our governing laws should be, but perhaps after listening to my story, you will understand why this particular topic is critical to the citizens of this state.

No person should ever have to worry about being killed due to their gender, race, ethnic group, or religion; however, none of us in this room are naïve enough to think that does not happen. Ohio currently classifies crimes committed against certain protected groups as "hate crimes", which allows for penalty enhancements when a perpetrator is sentenced for their criminal act. It is never ok for a person to be targeted simply for what they are. What I implore of you is that targeting police, fire, EMS, or military is no different and should be classified accordingly.

I have been a police officer since 2001. I didn't grow up in a police family or ever really have any interest in law enforcement. I didn't even really know any cops. Growing up in a larger, urban city in Northeast Ohio, my only real experiences with cops were hearing lots of sirens in my neighborhood and seeing them in my schools, but never really having any interaction with them myself. Mostly, I just didn't think about police at all.

Fast forward about ten years and I end up married to one. My husband Bryan, a Columbus police officer and proud United States Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to pursue law enforcement, so I thought I would go through the testing process and see what happened. I ended up doing well and was fresh out of the academy with the world at my fingertips at age 21. We both loved our jobs and thought it was the most fun profession in the world. Within my first month, I knew this was what I was meant to do. Back then, we all knew police work could be dangerous but I always thought most police deaths happened only if we interrupted someone in the commission of a crime, or someone trying to get away.

Bryan and I had everything we could ever want – jobs that we loved and were fortunate enough to be paid well enough to live pretty comfortably, a nice house in a Columbus suburb, and most of all, a brand new baby girl.

Everything changed on the morning of January 6, 2005. I got up and went to my normal exercise class at the YMCA while Bryan went to his regular special duty job at 5/3 Bank on the east side of Columbus. He had begun to work some extra duty jobs as a way to pay the additional expenses that come along with having a baby. As I normally did, I called him on my way home to see how things were going and if he would be home on time, but he didn't answer his phone. About 20 minutes later, standing in my kitchen, I called again and there was still no answer. I can still remember that defining moment in my life as if it were yesterday instead of over 12 years ago. I knew right then, I could feel it in my stomach, in my gut, that something horrible had happened. At that moment in time on a random, cold Tuesday

morning in January, I knew that my entire life was about to change. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood in the kitchen and waited for the inevitable, for the news to be delivered. Less than a half hour later, there was a knock at my front door. There stood Bryan's best friend, Columbus PD Lieutenant Donnie Oliverio, with a look of what can only be described as pure despair on his face. I have replayed this scene over and over in my mind, almost like a movie scene that you can never forget. Bryan had indeed been shot and killed, by someone who attempted to rob the bank. Someone who, instead of fleeing when he realized there was a cop inside the bank, instead chose to open fire and take a life.

Viewing my dead husband's body at the ER can only be described as a surreal experience, something out of my worst nightmare – except that it's a nightmare that you never get to wake up from. Riding in an ambulance as his body was transported to the Franklin County Morgue and placed into a freezer is something that will never leave my mind. Signing the paperwork for your husband's organs to be donated, when you have an infant at home, is horrific. Becoming a widow at age 25 is not something that I ever thought, in a million years, was even a possibility. My daughter becoming fatherless at 6 months old is something that could never happen. I was living in a bubble of what can only be described as ignorance, thinking that awful things only happened to other people.

I know better now. What I have seen over the past few years is that more and more people are beginning to kill cops simply because they are cops. Things are different now and they're changing more rapidly by the day. We are at a place in American history where police are viewed with suspicion, disdain and sometimes even hatred. I don't know how exactly we got here, but we are here nonetheless.

In 2016, there were 64 police officers shot and killed in America – 24 of which were in ambush style attacks. Imagine being at the gas station, just minding your own business and filling up your car, only to have someone walk up to you, shoot you point blank in the head, then continue to shoot you after you have fallen to the ground. It sounds unimaginable, but that's exactly what happened to Deputy Darren Goforth on August 28, 2015.

On July 7, 2016, twelve officers were shot and five killed during a protest in Dallas. Prior to the sniper beginning his assault on these officers, the protest was peaceful with no other incidents reported. These officers had done absolutely nothing to the man who took their lives. They were strangers to him. They were killed for no other reason than the uniform that they wore.

The very next day, an officer in a St Louis suburb was shot in the back while he was walking back to his cruiser after a traffic stop. That same afternoon in Georgia, an officer was lured to a home on a fake 911 call and subsequently ambushed with gunfire when he arrived. Again, on that very same day, just north of Atlanta, a motorist drove up next to a police officer sitting in his cruiser and opened fire. The reason? All of them, every single one, were targeted simply because they were cops.

Officer Thomas Cottrell was ambushed just last year, in the tiny village of Danville OH, right outside of his police station. By the own words of the shooter's girlfriend, he just "wanted to kill a cop." This was an act of pure hatred committed against a man for no other reason than the uniform that he proudly wore.

So where does this leave us? Police are getting wary. Who can blame us, really? It's no fun to have a target on your back. It's also no fun to constantly have your head on swivel, always watching people intently, wondering if anyone around you might want to kill you because of your profession. One of my greatest fears is that qualified, upstanding men and women will not consider law enforcement as a job because the risk just isn't worth the rewards.

I was initially unsure about coming today because I rarely tell people outside of law enforcement about my personal story of loss. The reason for this is twofold – first, I'm not a person who likes others to feel bad for me. I don't want anyone to pity me, because I realize that everyone has experienced tragedy and I am very fortunate for the things that I still have.....but, the main reason I don't share what has happened to me is because the first question is always this: "How can you still do this job after your husband was killed doing the same thing?" No matter how I try to explain the "why", the truth is, no one can possibly understand besides other cops. I don't expect anyone else to understand. I feel fortunate to have this brotherhood and sisterhood where we understand each other. This is a job with a lot of heartbreak. It's not what people see on television. Mostly, police work is dealing with people on their worst days. It's a lot of watching people throw their lives away due to heroin and children losing their parents in overdoses. Sometimes, it's a child being accidentally shot and killed by a young sibling. Other times, it's watching someone take their last breath after a horrible car accident. Often, it's responding to someone's home after the found that their loved one has committed suicide. There are many moments of tragedy mixed in with the occasional bit of excitement that gets our adrenaline going.

However, once in a while, the stars align and we get to feel like we have done something for the greater good. The moments when child molesters get sent to prison, or people who prey on the elderly finally get successfully prosecuted. Those are the moments, for me at least, that refill my tank and remind me why this is the best job in the world.

Many times, I find myself at Grant Hospital and the Franklin County Morgue for the investigations I work. There isn't a single time I walk into either facility where I don't flash right back to January 6, 2005. Whenever I attend an autopsy, I always think that my husband probably laid on that same table for his post-mortem. When I'm at Grant, I think to myself "Was this the room where I viewed his body?" That day is, and always will be, with me – whether I want it to be or not.

So where does this take us? I desperately want everyone here today to know that police are people, too. Normal people with families, goals, and plans for the future. People who don't want to be killed over the uniform they wear. People who want to see their children grow up.

I often wonder what Bryan felt during his final moments. I don't think anyone ever can imagine what it feels like to be moments from death, until you are just that....about to die. Did he think about me? Did he think about our daughter? Did he die quickly or did he suffer? These are the thoughts that I have to push out of my head in order to stay emotionally healthy and live a normal life. My testimony is not about mourning the past, but rather attempting to change the future. I am not sure we can stop anyone from wanting to harm police or other first responders, but what we can do is show that we refuse to tolerate it. It can be shown, by your vote, that first responders and other public servants are valued and

appreciated. This proposed bill is a step in that direction. It is my understanding that several other states have similar bills in the works, and I hope that even more states follow suit.

I sincerely appreciate you taking the time to listen to my testimony today. Thank you for your public service to the State of Ohio.