

Testimony of Kathleen Wiant
House Committee on Primary and Secondary Education
November 18, 2020

Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 310.

On November 12, 2018, we lost our son Collin Wiant tragically just a couple of months into his freshman year at Ohio University. When I say that we tragically lost him one might think that we are talking about a car accident, a physical ailment or even foul play. No, we lost Collin to something that can be solved easily if society simply stops turning a blind eye to an age-old problem that continues to get worse and worse as time goes on -- hazing.

In this case, Collin was pledging a fraternity and he was exposed to weeks upon weeks of cruel and dangerous treatment like sleep deprivation, forced drug and alcohol abuse and physical abuse. It all culminated in that fateful early morning in November when Collin was forced to inhale a canister of Nitrous Oxide, or a “whippet” which led to his death by asphyxiation. All of this done in the sake of “brotherhood”.

The act of Hazing is a slow process that starts out innocently enough. Do my laundry. Clean my dorm room. It builds and builds to more dangerous requests as time goes on because the victim wants so badly to be included in the fraternity, sorority, club or sport that they will do anything to make it happen and they tell themselves that it “will all be over soon” after they make the team or are ceremoniously initiated. This is referred to as “Creeping Normality” and it is defined as accepting objectionable change when it occurs in small amounts.

To make matters worse, the antagonists hang the specter of a destroyed social life, rejection and ridicule for the rest of the time they are affiliated with the institution or team if they do not comply to the abuse. This creates unbelievable leverage for the antagonists and incredible pressure for the victim. This is why only 5% of hazing is reported at all. The fear of abandonment and of not belonging, as studies show, can cause us to experience PHYSICAL pain in many instances. We are always better off when we feel a sense of acceptance in a group and it is these basic feelings that drive the desire to fight through whatever it takes to belong. All of this adds up, at the very least, to a lasting negative emotional episode that can stay

with someone for years. Or in too many cases, as with my son Collin, it can end in death.

You might think that these hazing victims are the kids with low self-esteem, coming from broken homes so they probably didn't have the will to fight back or report it. Collin and many other victims debunk that theory. Collin was a self-confident, bright and articulate athlete. He was an honor roll student who spent summers volunteering at Miracle League of Ohio helping special needs children play baseball. He was a born leader and was pledge class president. He made a point to fight for those who did not have a voice and to always help the "underdog." This underscores the real fact: People we would NEVER suspect are the ones who fall victim into the hazing trap, and some die from it. Recently, a green Beret soldier died from a choke hold as a result of hazing. I'm sure you would all agree that a Green Beret soldier is not someone that any of us would consider as having a lack of self-esteem.

The fact is that hazing is a premeditated and deliberate act that is used in deceptive ways to gain control. Its intent is to build allegiance, brotherhood and solidarity in the ranks, but in reality, it does not provide any of these things. To make matters worse, our laws in Ohio fail to provide serious consequences for these acts. With the lack of deterrence, hazing has manifested itself into a badge of *pride* and *tradition*, and those points are used to justify its existence as a practice.

Suppose I brought out two individuals before you and explained that each was guilty of a misdemeanor offense. One had a parking ticket. The second had water boarded a young man, beat him with a belt, made him chug an entire bottle of hard alcohol, did not allow him to sleep for long periods of time and forced illegal drugs on him, risking injury, serious bodily harm, or even death. Wouldn't you question our laws on hazing? Wouldn't you question how this could go on with just a fine as a punishment? Wouldn't you question justice? Wouldn't you question why Ohio has not stepped up like other states and said, "we will not stand for this and we will not lose our best and brightest leaders of tomorrow to something so heinous as hazing."

Every day that goes by we grieve for our sweet boy. Collin left behind 4 siblings that are strong like he was and are picking up the pieces and healing slowly. He left behind so many relatives, close friends, and church and school communities all trying to make sense of this. Our lives moving forward are dedicated to spreading kindness and courage through Collin's foundation. We are bound and determined to not make his death a simple "traffic ticket" ...we owe it to that fabulous young man, son, grandson, nephew, friend to make this right and to save lives. I ask you and the members of the

Ohio House to please pass SB 310 to impose stiffer penalties for this act that is destroying the lives and dignity of our children. Thank you.