

Ohio House Civil Justice Committee
Proponent Testimony of Julie Boak
SB 237 Uniform Public Expression Protection Act
November 19, 2024

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Matthews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Julie Boak. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 237, the Uniform Public Expression Protection Act- Anti-SLAPP

As an adult, my mother Bridget Mahoney, had a right to leave her abusive marriage to my father, Sam Boak, when I was a year old. As a child, I was not afforded those same rights.

Over the years I was forced by the courts in my father's hometown to visit him, no matter how much I spoke up that he was hurting me in every way possible. I faced a legal system that seemed to value a parent's right to torture offspring over a child's right to grow up unscarred.

I could not understand why a genetic relationship gave him a right to do things that if it had been anyone else, like my soccer coach, would have put that person behind bars. Maybe the courts didn't want to believe that because of who he was, the owner of a prominent business, a Rotary Club president, a Canfield City Councilman, that he could possibly be doing the things I was saying.

But the reality is-

Along with emotionally and physically hurting me, my father sexually abused me when I was 5, or at least that's the first time I remember. That's not something one really ever gets over, no matter how many times you say it out loud. And this is the hardest thing for me to say nothing, nothing, ever feels normal and natural again for a child who has been molested, the age of innocence ceases to exist.

Looking back, he began to groom me when I was a toddler, putting me in beauty pageants I didn't want to be in, dressing me up and taking pictures that many would consider child pornography. It haunts me to know what he has done with those pictures.

It took until I was ten years old for a trusted new attorney and a visiting judge with no ties to Youngstown to finally listen to me and stop the visits. But stopping the visits didn't stop the abuse.

For the next 8 years he not only physically stalked me he also stalked me through the courts and the courts allowed him. He had the right to use the legal system to harass me, cause me devastating emotional pain and drain our family financially- all under the guise of trying to resume visitation, which he really didn't want anyway.

This meant more court proceedings, more testimony, hiring and spending more on lawyers and all the while a threat of having to be with him hanging over my head. I didn't have mental peace

of mind and I didn't have physical peace, there was always the fear of him showing up out the blue. And I certainly didn't trust the people who would decide my fate.

All through my high school years when I should have had fun playing on my soccer team, enjoying homecoming and prom and all the other great things you get to do in high school - I was in and out of court.

But now it wasn't just Youngstown, it was Butler County too, and sometimes there were two trials going on at once-one where I lived with my mother near Cincinnati and the other five hours away where my father lived. On top of everything else that was going on I had to get a restraining order against him when I was 15yrs old. He fought it, we had a lengthy trial and as soon as the trial was over, he violated the restraining order and we were back in court for another trial where he was found guilty with little to no consequence.

Meanwhile in Youngstown, unbelievably, and with the domestic relations court judge knowing that a five -year restraining order was in effect and that he was found guilty of violating it, he was STILL allowed to pursue visitation. How could that be? I was shattered. Despair set in deeply.

I was a freshman. It was a living nightmare. I was terrified the courts would force me to visit my abuser. I had a new guardian ad litem in Youngstown and had to start all over in telling what he did to me, yet another in the countless number of people I kept having to tell my story to over the years.

It seemed like the guardian understood and would speak on my behalf. I also spoke with the magistrate privately and I was told later that he was very moved by our conversation. It took a year and a half to go through all the hearings and before a decision was reached. I was now going into my junior year in high school.

The judge ruled it would be psychologically harmful to me to visit him. Incredibly, the guardian ad litem said my father had "made some mistakes" and should be given another chance.

During that year and a half, I had to go on antidepressants. I felt like I was in the fight of my life, but I wasn't sure I wanted to live anymore. One day instead of cutting my wrist, I closed the knife drawer and grabbed a pair of scissors and butchered my hair instead.

I wanted to escape, to be someone else. I had been in therapy to heal my wounds from the past and move forward with my life, but when he filed to reestablish visits, the past was dredged up, and I felt like I was on trial. I didn't trust the legal system to protect me, and each passing month added more and more layers of agonizing hurt that I am still faced with overcoming.

My scars run deep.

Since I first gave that speech to the National Foundation of Women Legislators while I was in college, I have worked very hard on healing those scars. Emotionally I feel healthy, but

childhood trauma takes a heavy toll. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) studies by the CDC have shown how childhood stress and trauma can impact adult health.

The long-term activation of our body's fight or flight stress response weakens the immune system and the ability to fight illness and disease. I have suffered chronic upper respiratory infections, mononucleosis, Lyme disease, PTSD, severe sleep disorder, chronic fatigue, anxiety and depression, and battled cancer.

Speaking publicly, trying to help others, has been healing for me.

But it came at a great cost. Early in 2015, my father tried to silence me. Along with my mother and the organization she worked for, I was sued by my father, Sam Boak, and his business, Boak and Sons Inc., for defamation, for the testimony I gave to the Ohio Senate in support of the Tina Croucher Act. He claimed that I was hurting him and his multi- million- dollar business by telling what he had done to me as a child. I had been trying to forge a normal life for myself. I graduated from The Ohio State University, worked diligently to overcome the trauma I endured and was looking forward to establishing my career.

When the defamation lawsuit was filed, I was devastated knowing that once again I had to face my abuser in a court system I had no faith in. Old anxieties came back. My sleep was destroyed. The lingering fear that at any moment I would be tapped on the shoulder by a process server and the constant anticipation of having to relieve all the nightmares of my past became overwhelming.

The lawsuit created never-ending thoughts in my head of the times he molested me. My flashbacks were paralyzing. A constant loop of memories I had worked so hard to make peace with. I began to question-how many other times had he done this to me? Were there others I had buried so deep just to survive. I wanted it all to end.

Once again, I had no control over my life. I looked to my mother.

Though she was filled with compassion and care, she was powerless to stop my father from once again using the courts as a battleground against me. We both were.

One day in her presence, those unbearable looping thoughts took hold of me, I felt jumping from the balcony of my 16th floor apartment would be the only way to silence them.

If Ohio had an Anti SLAPP law, I would have been protected from this latest torment by my abuser. Please support SB 237 so my nightmare doesn't happen to anyone else.