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Ohioans for Child Protection
Proponent Testimony HB 322
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Chairman Senator Manning, Vice-Chair Senator Reynolds and Ranking Member Senator Hicks-Hudson, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 322.

My name is Melissa Childs. I was born and raised in Green Township in Hamilton County. I attended Oak Hills Schools, graduating from Oak Hills High School in 1997. I graduated from Ohio University in June 2001 and in August 2001, I moved to Los Angeles where I have resided ever since.

I was first sexually groomed, then sexually abused by William Stergiopoulos for 4 years from 1993 - 1997. Stergiopoulos was a teacher at both Bridgetown Junior High School and Oak Hills High School. The abuse took place at both schools, his home, his car (both in Ohio and across state lines) and his mother's home.

I was 13 when I began the 9th grade at Bridgetown Junior High School in 1993, a year younger than most of my classmates. I turned 14 in September of that year. Mr. Stergiopoulos was my Biology teacher. He was very friendly and gregarious, full of jokes that he'd used for the last 20 years and continued to use with each incoming class. Many of my classmates' older siblings had had him for a teacher in past years, he'd been around for that long. Most of the kids I knew said mostly the same thing, "Sterge is awesome." I didn't feel the same, which I think he picked up on. Something about the way he was overly friendly, overly jokey and overly touchy didn't sit right with me. He was very physical with many of the students - always high-fiving the boys, but hugging the girls. He had inside jokes with students that would get repeated whenever he'd see them - as a way to reinforce that he was a friend, an ok guy, someone to be trusted. He also ran a student bookstore which was a converted janitor's closet where he sold pencils, composition books and the like. It was open every day before school without fail and was a hangout for students. He was the sole keyholder.

The grooming began very slowly. One day in class, he instructed the students in my lab table row to pass quiz papers back a certain way. This was to ensure that I got the quiz he meant for me. I remember seeing a pencil-written note on my quiz that said, "Melissa I hope you got this paper. If not, we're both screwed! (smiley face)." My quiz had very slight pencil markings on the multiple choice options to indicate which one was the correct answer. It began as only a few answers to the more difficult questions, but it progressed until he was providing me answers to entire tests. Even though I still had not fully warmed to him, we had a secret. A teacher was helping me to cheat in his own class. In November or December of that year, my mother and I got into a car accident while she was driving me to school. We were not hurt, but I was very shaken up. Tickets went on sale for the winter dance that day and I had left my purse in our car, so I didn't have any money for lunch or for the dance ticket. I asked Mr. Stergiopoulos to borrow enough money and I promised to pay him back the next day. I knew he had access to cash - he ran the bookstore, after all. Of course, he was more than happy to oblige. He had been waiting for a moment such as this to ingratiate himself with me.

I grew up in a very abusive, unsafe, unpredictable home environment where alcohol was very prevalent. I was being bullied by a few kids in my grade but was too ashamed to tell anyone. So when Stergiopoulos began to pay attention to me - complimenting me, giving me money without even asking, giving me small gifts (pencils, notebooks), helping me cheat on his tests - it felt good that an adult took an interest in me. Someone who was older than my father (which to me, meant he knew more) and a respected authority figure was looking out for me and wanted to take care of me. I felt like despite what was happening at home, someone actually gave a damn about me. The notes on the quiz papers escalated to Post-Its and then to full length multi-page letters on yellow legal paper, always in his very neat handwriting. He would hand me the letters when no one was looking or slip them into my backpack or even my locker unnoticed. I began to hug him when I saw him because he was now a reassuring presence instead of a suspect one. He began calling me "Vivian" after Julia Roberts' character from the R-rated film *Pretty Woman*. He began signing his letters "Edward" after Richard Gere's character in the film. If you have not seen the film, Edward solicits the services of Vivian, a prostitute. This interaction marked a turning point because I had

only ever viewed him as a sort of father figure. This new dynamic was now flirtatious in nature, with sexual innuendo. He began quoting the film to me, as well as other R-rated titles that I hadn't even seen like Road House and Body of Evidence. His letters were still jokey but the jokes were more adult, referencing movie couples in the R-rated films and comparing those couples to him and me. He began buying me CDs, cards, candles, candy - gifts above and beyond the standard issue No. 2 pencils and blue books. I sensed that something had changed but I didn't know what to do or if I should do anything. I knew it was not right that he felt this way, but I was so desperate for an adult to pay attention to me and at least act like they cared. My home life had become a war zone and school was my only refuge.

Stergiopoulos wrote letters so frequently that I had a stack of them at home in my bedroom. My mother found them, who then told my father. My father then called Stergiopoulos. I don't know what transpired in that phone conversation, but I do know that Stergiopoulos was not deterred in the least. I remember him pulling me aside at school to tell me what had happened and how it wasn't a big deal, something like we just "had to be careful" and that my parents just didn't understand our special relationship. I remember him telling me very calmly that I didn't do anything wrong, not to worry and to let him handle it. It's worth noting here that my father called a church acquaintance of his who taught at Oak Hills High School at the time for advice. My father's acquaintance told my father that Mr. Stergiopoulos was just a friendly guy and didn't mean any harm.

It's important to note here that at this point in time, three adults were now aware of Stergiopoulos' actions and behaviors. However, they were not educated or aware enough to identify that what had been happening during my entire 9th grade year was sexual grooming. And even if they had been able to identify these behaviors, they would have had no legal recourse to stop it.

Looking back, I am convinced that other teachers suspected something. Stergiopoulos was very physically affectionate with me and very publicly affectionate with me. His behavior was noticed by other students because they would mention it to me. They would say things like, "Sterge loves you!" and "Why is he always talking to you?" and "He's always around!". So it had to be obvious to the school faculty. One has to look no further than the Bridgetown Junior High yearbook for 1993 - 1994 to get a glimpse of where Stergiopoulos' focus was. My photo is heavily featured throughout the book. In addition to managing his student bookstore, he was also the faculty advisor in charge of the yearbook, so he was at every major school event photographing students. He had many access points to children outside of the classroom setting.

Towards the end of my 9th grade year, I had been given free rein - hall passes, free study time alone in the bookstore that he managed, cash and gifts. The flirting became more and more overt with sexual innuendo. I didn't want to lose what I felt was the only person who cared about me, but I was also scared of how much his behavior had shifted. I didn't know what to do or who to tell or if it was wrong or who would even care if it was wrong. I was very much alone and on my own. The last day of 9th grade finally came and as kids were emptying out of classrooms and waiting around in the parking lot for their rides, it was the fun sort of chaos that comes with imminent summer vacation. I went back inside of the school to make sure I didn't leave anything in my locker, which as it happens was right by the student bookstore. Stergiopoulos had been waiting for me. He motioned for me to hug him and I did, but this time it felt different - it was an embrace like we were both adults instead of 14 and 50. He pressed himself to me so that I could feel his erection. He ran his hands down my sides and touched the sides of my breasts before turning his face towards mine to kiss me on the mouth.

I want to pause here. In these last paragraphs, it's important to note that I have detailed to you at least 18 Red Flag Child Sexual Grooming Behaviors as identified in "An Analysis of Sexual Grooming in Cases of Child Sexual Abuse by Educators" (published by Elizabeth L. Jeglic of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Georgia M. Winters of Fairleigh Dickinson University, December 2022) . Even if an adult, any adult, could clearly identify the behavior as grooming, they would have had no way to legally intervene on my behalf. HB 322 would have given them a legal recourse to report it and stop it. Teachers and school administrators, as mandated reporters, need effective mechanisms to actually report this dangerous behavior. If such a statute existed, protocols can be set in place to recognize, report and stop the grooming early on before it escalates to child sexual abuse or child rape.

But at this point in time, June 1994, no statutes existed and no reports were made. And none would ever be. Ever.

Stergiopoulos was free to continue communication with me and his access to me remained uninterrupted. He kept in touch with me over the telephone regularly that summer as both my parents worked during the day and my two younger sisters and I were on our own. Through those phone conversations over the summer and into my sophomore year, the flirting and innuendo intensified and he gradually pushed me to become more physical with him.

Stergiopoulos had sex with me for the first time when I was 15 years old and then a sophomore at Oak Hills High School. He coerced me into coming to his home while his wife was out of town, as she traveled to Columbus occasionally to visit their 3 adult children who lived there. He plied me with alcohol - wine coolers which gave me heartburn and made me sick - and he had sex with me in the bed he shared with his wife. I remember feeling like I was floating someplace else, out of my body. My mind was elsewhere, I couldn't say where. All I knew was that I desperately wanted someone to find me. I wanted someone to rescue me because I didn't want to be there anymore. But no one did.

I had been violated by someone who I thought cared about me. I remember feeling so sick, so diseased like a cancer had begun to attack my insides. Disgust, shame, hopelessness. I wanted to die. At this point, I had already begun to separate myself from any friends I had because of the shame I carried on the inside. I had begun to separate myself from my sisters as well. Stergiopoulos drove a wedge between me and anyone or anything that I loved. He told me my parents didn't understand me and didn't realize how special I was. There was no part of me that was out of reach for him. He'd already begun to talk about transferring to Oak Hills High School to be closer to me. He had to keep me where he could control me. Throughout sophomore year, Stergiopoulos continued to ply me with money, jewelry and clothing while the sexual abuse continued. At some point during my sophomore year, he took photographs of me in his home. I don't know what became of those photos or if they were ever developed, but he took them. I was 15. Later, he would even provide me with a cell phone so that he could keep track of me at all times.

I wanted to get away from him but I had nowhere to turn. I was trapped in an insidious cycle of wanting fatherly or parental closeness and attention but having to pay for it every time by being sexually abused. I was so consumed by shame that I couldn't even admit to myself what was happening, much less to anyone else. But also, who would believe me? Not my family. I had already been molested at age 11 by a 19 year old male at a church my family used to attend and was blamed by the congregation, his family and my own parents. Going to my family was not an option. Also, you have to understand that Stergiopoulos was a pillar in the community even outside of the Oak Hills School District. He was very active at his church (St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox) and well-known within the Greek community in Cincinnati. I think he may have even had ties to Ohio State University, where all 3 of his children attended. The man was beloved everywhere. But I was scared to death of him. I was trapped.

Looking back, as I got older I think Stergiopoulos realized that he needed to raise the stakes in order to control me. He took me on several shopping sprees, all of which were across state lines in Kentucky where no one would recognize us. I vividly remember him driving, with me in the passenger seat of his Cadillac Cimmaron and him saying to me, "Well, I've transported you across state lines, so it's federal now," smiling at me. I wanted to open the car door and jump out of the car while it was moving. At that point, suicide was the only solution I could come up with to make it all stop.

Stergiopoulos got bolder. He transferred to Oak Hills High School after my sophomore year. At his persistence, I signed up as his student aide which meant I could stay in his classroom during study hall. His classroom was in a heavily trafficked area on the main floor, highly concentrated with classrooms. During the 48 minutes of that period, he would religiously cover the window in the door to the classroom - so no one could see in if they tried. Stergiopoulos had sex with me regularly in his classroom in the middle of the school day. I asked him if he was worried that anyone would find out and I'll never forget what he said, "No one would ever say anything to my face, no one would dare. I'm hiding in plain sight." He had a way of speaking to me that was always calm, even and kindly almost - but when he was angry, there was no mistaking the threat underneath.

I want to pause here for a moment and reiterate to you that every pedophile, every predator says exactly the same thing. They know that their organization, whatever kind it may be - school, church, Boy Scouts, team sports - is complicit in this regard. Because organizations have not been trained to see the signs and if they do, they have no legal recourse to protect the child or children in clear and present danger.

The sexual abuse continued until I went away to college, although he did come to visit me in my dorm room in the fall of 1997. I think this goes to demonstrate how under Stergiopoulos' control I was even as I was technically an adult, having turned 18 in September of 1997. Eventually, I came to realize that I had a chance to start a new life for myself because I was 150 miles away. I thought he couldn't get to me and I could have what I'd always wanted - to just be a normal kid. I wanted to forget that any of it ever happened. I was making new friends, I was enrolled in challenging classes and attending a school with an outstanding journalism program on a beautiful campus. I wanted to start over in Athens and block the last 4 years from my memory.

I thought I could just end it - whatever that meant. I thought I could just say, "I don't want this anymore" and Stergiopoulos would leave me alone. I was 18 after all, right? Wrong. Stergiopoulos stalked me at college day and night - sending emails to my college email address, calling my dorm, sending me flowers, cards and packages to my dorm. In his emails, he'd begun to hint that he'd seen my younger sister in the hallways at Oak Hills, where she was a student. There was no escaping him.

Eventually, the Oak Hills School Board was notified about Stergiopoulos' actions and he took an early retirement in 1998. The Oak Hills School Board did not, to my knowledge, take any further action against him. However, in late 1998 the Cincinnati Enquirer was notified anonymously of the situation and turned the matter over to the Cincinnati Police Department. The Hamilton County District Attorney's Office also became involved. I was questioned at length by both the Cincinnati Police Department and the District Attorney's office.

I'll never forget one of the detectives telling me that he had actually heard rumors about Stergiopoulos and me. This detective lived not only on the same street as Stergiopoulos, but just 8 doors away. Stergiopoulos sexually abusing me was the worst kept secret in the community. Much like Jerry Sandusky at Penn State University, there were many capable adults who had either heard rumors or who were aware of the abuse and chose to do nothing. According to the other detective, Stergiopoulos had become unhinged. At a point, a temporary restraining order was initiated as I feared for my safety. I fully believed that if Stergiopoulos had an opportunity, he would try to kill me.

As I was questioned by the detectives on 2 separate occasions, I remember it was in a very cold office and I shook uncontrollably throughout both interviews. I remember telling them how cunning he was, how he was hiding "in plain sight" and had been undetected for years. I recounted every harrowing, shameful moment of the last 4 years down to the smallest details of his life that could only be known by someone close to him - what he looked like undressed, what the inside of his house looked like, what the inside of his mother's house looked like, how he had transferred his mother to the same retirement home I worked at part-time during high school. I gave them everything.

Ultimately, I did not testify in court against him. The DA's office explained to me that there was an option called a closed courtroom, wherein the press and guests of the court would not be allowed into the proceedings, which as I understood it was the only hope I had in protecting my identity. There had been a case very similar to mine during that time frame and local media had published a lot of identifying information, including names of family members - making it very easy to identify who the victim was. I had 2 younger sisters to think about and what they would have to endure, as they were still enrolled in Oak Hills Schools. The judge denied the request and therefore, I did not testify. I remember the representative from the DA's office saying to me, "But what if there are other children out there who have been molested by him?" As if the burden should fall solely on my young shoulders to right the wrongs of a dangerous predator. As if there weren't at least a dozen adults - adults in authority positions - who could and should have done more to protect a very severely sexually abused child. As if every single agency designed to serve and protect children - from the school system, to law enforcement, to the justice system - hadn't completely failed me in every possible way and let me fall right through the cracks.

Stergiopoulos was tried in juvenile court, to this day I'm not clear on why or how that decision was made. He pled guilty to three misdemeanor counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and was sentenced by Judge Sylvia Hendon to 180 days for each count with 170 days suspended for each count along with 5 years probation. He was not required to register as a sex offender but he was required to surrender his teaching license, as if that's the only way predators can access children.

Ultimately, he served a total of approximately 30 days.

For severely sexually abusing a child over the course of 4 years.

The local news coverage only added vicious insult to already dire injury. In one article, Judge Hendon blamed me directly for not being "more adamant" in coming forward to testify. Another article reported that Stergiopoulos himself had the temerity to testify that I "had initiated sexual contact." Several news articles referred to my being sexually abused as a "sex scandal." In addition, school staff, students, clergy and community members wrote letters in support of him. My worst fear was realized: no one believed me. And worse still, they thought it was my fault.

Senators, in case you've ever wondered why more victims of sexual abuse don't come forward, look no further than my story.

As soon as I could, I escaped to California in August of 2001 right after college graduation. I saved up tip money from waitressing at the Outback Steakhouse in Western Hills and I left as soon as I could. I got as far away from Stergiopoulos and Cincinnati as I could without crossing an ocean. I could be anonymous, no one knew me, I didn't know anyone and I could finally start over like I'd always wanted...except that isn't what happened. The complex post traumatic stress from being sexually abused spread its tentacles in all sorts of horrific ways over the next 20 years: alcohol and drug abuse, overdoses, bulimia, self-harm in the form of cutting, physically abusive relationships with men, panic attacks, crippling depression, nightmares, night terrors and several suicide attempts - one of which resulted in a forced hospitalization on a 5150 hold.

Today, I am leading a life I am proud of and I am leading a life of service to others, especially to those who have suffered similar abuse and trauma. I am not the trapped, abused, traumatized child afraid to speak up for herself. I am not afraid to tell the truth and shame the devil.

I refuse to let what Stergiopoulos did to me, break me.

William Stergiopoulos died on July 30, 2015. He is a threat no more. I have nothing to gain in sharing my painful story with you. I haven't lived in Ohio in decades and I have no children.

So why am I submitting this testimony to you and asking you to pass this bill?

I will not let what happened to me be in vain. If it's in my power to prevent what happened to me from happening to other children, I will do whatever I can. Because nothing can take away the 4 years of abuse he inflicted upon me, nor the decades of trauma that I experienced and still experience, as a result. Being violated at such a young age is like being murdered from the inside, except you have to move in the world as if you're still alive - walking dead. Innocence stolen, years stolen, potential stolen, safety stolen, sense of self stolen. Understand that these feelings will never, ever leave me - and I know they will never leave other survivors.

The only thing that I ask of you, Senators, is that you consider the characteristics and behavior that I've described to you very carefully. They are subtle, nearly invisible to the untrained eye. These behaviors over time, individually and cumulatively, serve to erode a child's sense of self and security. This is how predators operate. Where they operate is where they feel comfortable. Where they feel comfortable is in familiar surroundings amongst people familiar to them - especially children with whom they've built trust. How predators build trust is through grooming behaviors, many of which are outlined here in great detail.

Make no mistake, Senators. Grooming is not A gateway to sexual abuse, it is THE gateway. And you have the opportunity to cut predators off at the pass before their insidious behavior escalates to physical sexual

abuse - where adult hands and adult bodies can easily overpower and violate every inch of a defenseless child.

Parents, trusted school faculty, coaches, and adults in authority roles need to know how to identify these behaviors and have a reporting mechanism to law enforcement. HB 322 provides the education and the mechanism to pursue action against would-be predators who are intent on grooming innocent children for the purposes of sexual abuse and sexual gratification. The ingress points to children have multiplied rapidly in the years since Stergiopoulos died. Predators can reach children with a touch of a button and don't even have to be in physical proximity to them. HB 322 can help us all to provide the things Ohio's children need the most: support, security, safety and protection.