**HB 448**

**Proponent Testimony**

**Pacey Lawson**

Chairman Ginter, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee:

My name is Pacey Lawson and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to tell you why HB 448 is so important to me. My parents were never married and my father wasn’t even present when I was born. For the past 14 years he has come in and out of my life. Sometimes he is there for a few years, and then sometimes I won’t see him for another four. My father is remarried and as a result of his marriage, I have three half-brothers. Michael, Maddock, and Markus. I have never met my youngest brother who just turned one. Due to my Father and step-mother’s poor choices, my other two brothers have been brought in my life and then yanked away multiple times. I have so many fond memories with my brothers. Some included nature walks where we would pretend to look for bigfoot and even had bigfoot whistles. Michael would always grab a walking stick. Our favorite thing to do at Steak and Shake was get extra bowls full of cherries. We would go to do crafts at Lowes, go bowling, to the movies to see Paddington, and we made so many other fun memories.

Unfortunately, my Father yanked them out of my life again two years ago without just cause. I became severely depressed and had to see a counselor. I would cry every night and couldn’t sleep. My mother would console me. I lost my appetite, feared never seeing them again, and literally felt like there was a hole in my heart. I didn’t want to engage in activities that I loved. My grades began to drop because I couldn’t concentrate in school. I couldn’t even enjoy the time I had with the rest of my family or special occasions. I was always thinking about my brothers and wishing I could be part of their life. I begged my mother to do something because she was in law school. My mother filed a child support action, because it was the only way under Ohio law she could attempt to allow me to ask for third party visitation with my brothers under Ohio Revised Code Section 3109.051. At this point in time the case is still pending in juvenile court. Due to my Father’s non-compliance, combined with possible legal arguments, I fear that I may never get the chance to share my childhood with my siblings. I won’t get to watch them grow up. I won’t get to spend holidays or birthdays together. My brothers will never see me play football or hit triples and home runs. I feel like I am missing out on something really special and I don’t know if it will be repairable as adults, but I certainly hope so.

I want you to know that seeing my siblings meant so much to me, that it was the main reason that I didn’t get adopted by my step-dad. It would have severed any hope or legal claim I could even try that would allow me to see my siblings.

While, I am not a foster-child or adoptive child, I understand the deep part that is inside of us, that just wants to know where we came from and our blood-line. I think it would be worse for foster children and adopted children because they lose both parents and then basically have to live with a bunch of strangers. I don’t have my dad in my life either, but I am fortunate enough to have a great mom, step-dad, half-brother Chip, and step-brother Christian. A foster child or child in the system often loses both their parents and is then separated traumatically from their siblings.

My mother was a foster-child and aged out of the system. I have been impacted by that because I barely know any of my mother’s extended family. The time away from her siblings, made them not as close as she wishes they would be. That means, as her daughter, I don’t have a strong relationship with my Aunts, Uncle, or cousins. I barely see them or know them.

Not having my Father and siblings, and limited contact on the paternal side is one thing, but combining not having them on my maternal side, leaves a very limited amount of family connections for me.

This leaves me with two thoughts: First, that I believe this bill should apply to all children (not just those in foster care or adopted) because many states already do have sibling visitation statutes for ALL children, regardless of their situation, and there should be a definitive way to clarify the current statute in 3109.051 so it specifically emphasizes sibling and minor, and allows for situations outside child support hearings or divorce, where the parents were never married. Alternatively, HB 448 could apply for all children to have the right to petition to have relationships with their siblings regardless of whether they are in foster care or not.

However, even if you won’t, and even if I don’t get to see my siblings I still urge you to do this for foster and adopted kids. They need this bill to pass because they need these connections even more than I do. If they lose the last contacts they have, who will they have to lean on in this world. Please, pass this bill.

Chairman Ginter, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee might have.