Ohio Senate
Senate Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee
12/9/2020

Good Afternoon, Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. My name is Thom M. Shuman.

I am grateful to the committee for inviting written proponent testimony on SB 340, which I think is critical for, and to, families in Ohio. Like many folks in their 70's, it is too much of a risk to me in light of the pandemic, to come and testify in person, which I had hoped to be able to do.

I am also grateful beyond words to, and incredibly proud of, my wife, Bonnie Shuman.
I know she is providing written testimony as well, so will try not to repeat what she says. But it is because of her vision, her passion, her love for our son as well as other families affected by FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), that this bill is being considered. As well as my wife, I am indebted to Senator Stephanie Kunze for her willingness to meet with Bonnie on several occasions, and to become as involved and caring about this issue.

FASD is one of those 'hidden' disabilities which affect far more children, far more adults, far more families than most people know. It is hard to get diagnosed in many communities, it is hard to be treated, and it is difficult to find resources for those who have this disability. And it is a condition which can never be cured. Some experts estimate that the percentage of babies born with FASD is comparable to those born with autism, but again, very few people are aware of the condition, even doctors who have to deal with such patients.

At the age of 18 months, our son was placed with us for adoption. At that time, we were told to expect 'mild' developmental delays. However, it became increasingly clear that such delays were far more profound than first thought as he did not speak, except for some guttural sounds, had great difficulty sleeping, was constantly in motion, and beginning at the age of seven (7) began to exhibit increasing violent behavior. When he was first admitted as a psychiatric patient to Children's Hospital in Cincinnati, he was the youngest patient they had ever had (a trend that apparently) has continued. The violent outbursts would happen without warning, as if a switch had been thrown. No warnings, no precursors, no signs to watch out for. It just happened, and would sometimes last for 2-3 hours.

I could probably write a book about our journey with Teddy, but suffice it to say that we spent nearly 15 years with him being admitted repeatedly to the psychiatric unit at Cincinnati Children's. We had two different stays at a facility in Indianapolis, a stay at a facility in Louisville, and finally two different stays at facilities in Cincinnati (the first which had no real experience or training for folks with FASD). We spent almost every Saturday driving two hours in each direction to visit him. The toll on us physically, financially, emotionally, and spiritually has been profound. Unlike the some 80% of couples who divorce in this sort of situation (or are forced to divorce in order to get the services their child needs), we have remained married to one another. That is either a testament to our resilience, or our fatigue!

Finally, in March 2006, our son was placed at the Columbus Developmental Center by order of the probate court. This facility, with its staffing and programs, has been a literal Godsend to Teddy as well as to us.

As a pastor, I was trained to deal with various crises and conditions in families and family settings. But until we began this journey with Teddy, I had never heard of FASD. But since being on this journey, I have become involved with several families, and heard of more, who have had to deal with the same sort of struggles we have had, some of them with even more painful stories.

For many people, including some of my friends, they cannot understand why putting such a notice as directed in SB 340 (or on the labels of alcoholic beverages) would make any difference.

But since FASD can be caused by not only binge drinking, drinking through a pregnancy, a single night of drinking, or even one drink at the wrong moment in the pregnancy; if posting this notice can help one person not to take that drink, can help one child not to be born with verbal apraxia, mild retardation, brain damage, and mental disabilities like our son; if posting this notice can keep one family from having to experience the journey we have been on, it is worth it. It is worth it.

And if we can begin with that one person, that one child, that one family, maybe we can begin to change the lives and futures of more people, more children, more families.

Thank you for reading this testimony and I can be contacted regarding any questions through the chairs office.

Thom M. Shuman