

## **Testimony in Support of HB 994**

### **Legislation to end child marriage in Virginia, 18 No Exceptions**

Jan 30, 2024

Dear Virginia House of Delegates – Courts of Justice Committee, Committee Chair Hope, Vice Chair Simon and Distinguished Committee Members,

I am deeply appreciative to you and the Committee for considering this vital and important legislation.

I am a survivor of child marriage. My mother and stepfather forced me to marry a stranger without the permission of my father and the clerk that issued the license never asked me if I was willfully marrying this man, nor would I have told her, as I was terrified of my abusive stepfather. I was 16, a virgin, and was living in a religious cult, run by him and had been cut off from any contact with my father. I was married off against my will to a man of 28 years that I barely knew and with whom I had never been alone. My mother abandoned my safety and pushed me into marriage, and my father, who was not in the cult, no longer had any legal rights nor knew what was happening due to my adoption at the age of 11.

This legislation will stop children from being married through emancipation. The current law does not prevent forced marriages through coercion or parental pressure, while permitting statutory rape.

Children should not marry. Full stop.

In my case, once married, I was taken overseas with my new husband where my passport was taken from me. This lasted 2.5 years and it wasn't until I returned home that I was able to escape by having a car delivered with a key on the tire. I was 19 by then and had been pulled out of school in eighth grade and home schooled for just a year and then put into a life of servitude to cook, clean and care for younger children. I was not prepared for living in the outside world and had to find my way through the goodness of a couple that I had met briefly.

My childhood was taken from me in this cult as a result of being married off as a sixteen-year-old. I have struggled to build the life that I have today and get my education. It took me 5 years to divorce the man that I was forced to marry. I still carry the scars on my psyche from these events and have tried to work through the pain and trauma that they have caused me, but my frequent nightmares persist, and I suffer to this day. My mission is to stop this harmful practice that impacts girls that are married primarily to much older men, and that would otherwise be classified as statutory rape.

I am grateful for the opportunity to stand up for the defenseless children who are forced or coerced into marriage and hope that you will pass this legislation to lead the way in Virginia and ultimately influence other states to end child marriage in America. This has been called a war crime by the Hague and we must stop this harmful practice.

Sincerely,

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