

February 7, 2023

In Support of HB 1537

Dear Chairman Klemin, esteemed Committee members.

My name is Gabriela Balf, I am a psychiatrist in Bismarck and a parent, and I speak on my behalf.

Almost ten years ago, my husband and I followed the lead of two family friends, also physicians, and moved to North Dakota, district 47. We all came with skills, passion, and a will to contribute to this state's health. The narrative we knew about North Dakota is that here people hold dear the old-fashioned ideas of hard work, independent thinking, respect, and honesty towards each other, and fierce protection of children. We thought this was the ideal place to raise our children and contribute with everything we have learned in our long years of highly specialized training at prestigious schools.

The medical community embraced us, we felt appreciated, and we gave our best, becoming the leaders of our departments. Our children made the schools proud.

Then my public health interests directed disenfranchised people my way. I listened to parents like you and me who saw their children crushed in school or on social media due to relentless bullying. Let me be clear. We have all experienced bullying. In the same way we have all experienced bad weather. But not all bullying is the same, and North Dakota weather is definitely special. It is one situation to be the straight white athlete in your high school and another to be the shy, self-doubting gay or transgender kid in school. It's one situation to have a family that can buy you a good winter jacket and another to get a hand-me-down that leaves you frozen.

How much does targeted bullying matter?! **Words matter.** I surely hope so. If you still remember words of encouragement from your mother, from your role models, I am sure you can understand what relentless demeaning means for some. More recently, we saw what Jamestown kids cheerfully expressed in a recent basketball game. Middle school taunting? How much is too much? How do you know that you crossed a line?

I get it. In a fairly homogenous state like ours, minorities like Muslims, Black kids, or LGBT+ people are not very well understood. Yet, as a new US citizen, I always thought First Amendment applies to expressing opinions that do not purposefully hurt another. I thought my kids will learn here in ND how to be respectful towards others and appreciate hard work, integrity, and the government institutions, legislative body notwithstanding.

What do they learn instead? Let me tell you what my patients recount: that it's ok to get relentless shaming on Instagram, be outed by your teachers, being constantly compared to a white, Christian, cis-gendered, middle-class, able-bodied baseline. If some kids commit suicide, it's because of their weakness, not because of the minority stress like science has demonstrated.

As an immigrant, I thought I will be valued for what I bring to the table. I thought my two daughters will be respected and will thrive in an independent thinking, solidly principled community. What do I see? Their views are demeaned, they are urged to conform to a baseline, and their lively minds are squashed under the spectrum of "if you're not with us, you're against us." This gives me flashbacks. This aggressive, simplistic view is what I ran from when I left communist Romania.

A nation's strength lies in its protection of the weakest. Yes, some of my patients are the weakest. Some of my daughter's colleagues, like her transgender friends or the pregnant 15-year-old colleague, are socially weak. Are we going to be the adults in the room, setting fair rules for everyone, and protect our children, or will we follow undigested ideas that say that if you are a healthy, able-bodied privileged majority you are free to do onto others anything you feel like doing?!

I believe in rules. As a psychiatrist, I know that that people's logical brain does not dictate their actions. Sure, most people don't start their day wanting to hurt someone. AND rules are here to reinforce principles that may be forgone when one's day gets awry. Had we all been rational beings, we would never need rules, Founding Fathers, a Century Code, etc. We would adopt our religion's equivalent of the Ten Commandments, and all would be fine. When we brought our thoughts to the Bismarck's City Commission hearing on the Hate Crime ordinance in June 2022, we were told that we need a state-level policy to address a sad reality that taints and diminishes our state's reputation.

I hope this bill represents this state-wide policy that will reinforce what we all think **North Dakota is about: an independent-thinking state that welcomes and appreciates everyone who works hard and means well. A highly moral state that is not afraid to look at its weaknesses and address them head on.** As a psychiatrist, a public health agent and as a parent I urge you to give a "DO PASS" recommendation to HB 1537.

Thank you for your time, and I stand for questions,

Gabriela Balf, MD, MPH

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Balf" followed by a stylized arrow pointing to the right.

Clin Assoc Prof – UND Dept of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science