

House Bill 1012 Testimony

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Hello everyone! My name is Amorelle Upton, and I want to start by saying that I am so lucky to be sharing my testimony with you today. I am now a voice for those who don't have one; because I was once that person.

Growing up in Fargo North Dakota with a loving family and a great group of friends was pretty fantastic. I was involved in a variety of activities including dance, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, church, and any new activity I could try. I was involved in clubs and held a multitude of leadership positions that contributed to an otherwise excellent high school experience. All told, my life was exactly what any 16-year-old could want. Unfortunately, a lot of this quickly changed five years ago. Without even knowing it was happening, I found myself in an abusive relationship during my junior year of high school. This is something that I never thought could happen and at first, I was convinced it wasn't happening.

Everything started out seemingly perfect; a relationship that I thought would be forever. In the beginning, signs of love and affection overflowed. I was bombarded with gifts, kindness, and appreciation. However, within weeks of him relocating to another state and without me even realizing it, I slowly began losing myself. I knew deep down I wasn't myself. Some of his demands seemed excessive and unreasonable, but I was doing this for someone I loved, so maybe it was OK.

The first signs seemed subtle. One day, when I was checking my Instagram and Snapchat, I noticed several of my friends missing from my feed. After looking into it a bit more, I discovered that he had blocked several of my friends. At first, I thought it was a protective gesture and didn't give it much thought. However, before I knew it my entire contact list had been wiped out.... family, friends, coaches, mentors, anyone who had meaning in my life. I complied to keep him happy. After all, he said he loved me. Brainwashed without even realizing it, I figured that would be the extent of his demands, but sadly, this was just the beginning.

Before I knew it, he was telling me to delete every single picture in my camera roll, my snapchat memories, and even the pictures on Instagram with other people. In his mind, if I really loved him, all I needed was his love, his pictures, his connections. His actions were designed to segregate me from my support system, people I loved and trusted. I knew this was sideways, but if this was all he needed to feel good about our relationship, what could it hurt to comply? The conflicting emotions of the situation were scary and confusing. None of this felt normal either, but maybe this was my new normal. Maybe I really DID only need him. I later learned that was manipulation talking, which I fell for over and over.

What came next stays on my mind to this very day. He demanded that I quit activities and sports. It started with swimming and then gymnastics. Unlike swimming, I loved gymnastics. I was making such great progress within the sport, being elected captain and a leader of my team. As much as I loved the sport, I would rationalize why it was all right to quit. After all, I wasn't planning to pursue the sport after high school.

I felt guilty for letting down my team, but in the back of my mind, it didn't matter because he was all I needed. I wish I had realized earlier how much I let myself down, too. Something that was my passion was lost in an instant. I remember one of my teammates, and best friends expressed to her mom that she was really concerned about me. She felt like something wasn't right. Her mom then reached out to my mom which is when my parents found out that something really was off. At first, I was really angry with my friend. Why would she tell my parents and ruin my so-called "happiness." What I didn't realize at the time is that she probably saved my life, and I'm forever grateful for her genuine concern.

You would not have recognized me back then. As I think about the months in that relationship, I don't either. Far from the person I am today, I don't recognize that girl or the lengths she went to keep peace, follow his rules, and avoid further fear. I wasn't showering, brushing my hair, or putting any effort into an everyday routine. I followed his dress code to a tee – literally – one specific pair of baggy, Under Armour joggers, rotating between two, extra-large shirts.

I was told I wouldn't enjoy the outcome if I were to not follow his rules. The threats became more and more frequent. He was managing my every move. He was miles away and yet constantly in my space. Every minute of every day was directed. I felt suffocated, even walking to class. He also forbid me to talk to anyone, including friends, peers, and even teachers. When I walked to class throughout the day, he required me to Facetime. When I didn't, he would yell and berate me. I remember one specific day on Facetime when I smiled at someone passing by. I immediately heard screaming coming from my phone and instantly regretted even smiling. The control became obsessive and constant.

Alongside my self-esteem, my grades and school performance suffered, too. Once a thriving 4.0 student, my grades plummeted to a 2.1 grade point average. This was far from the stellar track record I was so proud of and nothing I could have ever imagined. More and more people in my life started raising concerns. Consumed by his control, I shared my family's concerns with him. After that, segregating me from my friends was not enough. He wanted division and distance between me and my parents, too. He told me I needed to leave my parent's house and stay with my grandparents. He convinced me to make up a story and tell counselors at school that I didn't feel safe at home. This resulted in my parents being brought to the school and my whole life flipping upside down. I stayed at my grandparents for two weeks and that's when the results of the abuse began to surface, and I realized that something really wasn't right. I wasn't even talking to my parents or sister, all of whom loved me and just wanted the real me back.

The turning point was when I didn't even go home for Thanksgiving. I had never missed this family holiday. That's when I knew I needed to tell someone and get help... but who? All of my contacts were deleted. I no longer had a phone because it was with my parents, and the only form of communication I had with him was a shared google doc on my school computer. Out of some miracle, I remembered one of my teammates' phone numbers. In tears and distraught, I told her everything. I told her I didn't have the courage to end the relationship because I feared what he would do. She ended the relationship for me and in that moment, I felt pounds of weight lifted off my shoulders. I was terrified, I was nervous, I was hopeless, but I knew I needed to be done.

My school quickly introduced me to a counselor from the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center in Fargo. I was grateful for the support, but the healing process was slow. It was hard to face the severity of what had transpired so quickly and as glad as I was to be out of the relationship, I didn't want him to get in trouble. The Sunday after the relationship ended, I went to church for the first time in

eight months. As faith would have it, the lesson was on healing from toxicity and abuse. The pastor asked anyone who needed a healing hand to stand. I stood up and my dad stood up with me as tears started rolling down my face. In this moment, I knew I was ready to begin my healing process and reshape the fear that had become a daily experience.

When I had the courage, I shared my story on Facebook and Instagram. Several people came forward with similar experiences and asked me for help and advice. This is when I knew that the pain that I went through could be used to share hope for other survivors.

In addition to sharing my experience and leading others to abuse resources, I wanted to personally contribute. The following summer, I began fundraising for the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center, so that others could benefit from their free, confidential services. My senior year of high school, I joined Philanthropy and Youth where I had the opportunity to become a leader of the club and chose the topic of domestic violence nonprofits. I then started a mental health club at my school where the goal was to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health disorders and focused on suicide prevention.

Once at UND, I went through the sorority recruitment process. I found a home away from home in Alpha Chi Omega, another organization who shared my passion for domestic violence awareness, its national philanthropy. The experience led me to an incredible group of women and enabled me to continue investing in a purpose and partnership with CVIC.

Without organizations like Alpha Chi Omega and CVIC, so many stories would go untold, and so many victims would feel stuck, like I was. When I think about the way my 16-year-old life transitioned from such a scary, confusing place to a community that welcomed me with open arms, I hardly recognize who I was. With meaningful prevention and intervention programs, healing can happen; lives can change. Thanks to organizations like Rape and Abuse Crisis Center, mine did.

Reflecting back five years ago, I truly wish that myself and those around me had been more educated on the topic of domestic violence. Although the resources were available to me after I had gotten out of the relationship and I am forever grateful for that, I often wonder if the circumstances would have been different if I were more educated. Would I have recognized the signs sooner? Would my peers in school avoid asking me “why didn’t you leave sooner?” or not have their first thought be to tell me “You’re being dramatic and quit talking about it.” I believe that the education now available through CVIC to all ages in our community could create a great impact on the upcoming generations.

If I would have told 16-year-old me, who thought her world was ending, that she’d be in doctorate program and surrounded by people each and every day that love and care about her, she wouldn’t have believed it. So, if you take one thing away from what I’ve stated today, I want you to know that it’s okay not to be okay. It’s okay to seek help, and it’s okay to feel lost. But it does get better even when it seems impossible. Opportunities are out there waiting for you, even if you feel hopeless. Lastly, help those around you and don’t be afraid to speak up, because you never know when it can save someone’s life. Thank you.