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***In support of House Bill 1361***

Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this introduction. My name is Tyler Merkel, and I represent 31:8 Project, a Bismarck-based nonprofit dedicated to equipping and challenging society to proactively address human trafficking through education, advocacy, and awareness. Our work is accomplished through program areas including education and human trafficking survivor mentorship. In 2024, we were privileged to provide services to over 60 survivors of human trafficking, 85% of whom were trafficked within North Dakota. Additionally, we delivered nearly 170 presentations statewide to a diverse range of audiences, including law enforcement, schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations. This year, we will host our *5th Annual Bakken Human Trafficking Summit* in Bismarck, with the goal of educating over 400 professionals and community members. Today, it is my honor to introduce Piper Bjornsen, a lived experience expert of human trafficking that has been part of 31:8 Project's *Survivor Mentorship Program*. Her courage to testify on her own behalf is a powerful reminder of why we must address this issue with urgency and compassion. Piper brings firsthand insight into the realities of human trafficking, and both of us will be available for questions regarding our support of House Bill 1361.

Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Piper Bjornsen. When I think about my journey and hear other survivor stories, what they went through and how we all got here, I compare it to The Oregon Trail. You all remember that game? It was a historical thing! It sometimes feels like each of us had a wagon with a crew and trekked across the United States. Lots of ups and downs, broken wagon wheels....and some of us didn't make it.

From a young age, I was told to be seen and not heard. I did not have any strong female role models. My mother was searching for a man that would take care of "everything" and a

revolving door of men led to physical and sexual abuse at a young age. Looking back on it, I see how it negatively affected my outlook on relationships and what a loving partner is. It showed a pattern in my life with every relationship I was in.

We are all searching for love and acceptance. We want someone who "gets us". It's human nature. Unfortunately, when you're dealing with past sexual trauma and you don't understand PTSD, often you use drugs to self-medicate. For as long as I could, I ran as fast and hard right into the arms of my trafficker, which occurred in Williston, North Dakota.

Often when I tell people my story or hear others' opinions on human trafficking, people ask the question "why didn't you leave", and it's difficult to answer. When I got into the "life", which is another phrase for human trafficking, I did not realize what was happening. Traffickers feed off your insecurities. They know what you need to establish trust and say all the right things. I felt like he was giving me so much and I wanted to appeal to him. It was an extreme situation and a very dangerous lifestyle. But I survived.

Years later, while I was serving a prison sentence here in North Dakota due to my trafficking situation, I got a visit from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) and Homeland Security. They had some questions for me about my ex-boyfriend, the trafficker. We met over the course of my prison sentence and put the pieces together. It took time for me to realize the situation I had been in. I was part of a 5-year investigation and just one of many women who fell victim to my trafficker. When I got out of prison, I testified against him in a federal courtroom. It is believed that he trafficked close to 30 people in North Dakota and around the nation. He got a 20-year sentence.

For each human trafficking case, justice looks different. In fact, many survivors have not seen successful prosecutions take place in these situations. Hopefully with bills like House Bill 1361, it will allow the conversation to continue why greater sentences need to happen when it comes to this crime. My testimony is just one example of the many different cases out there. Through my work with 31:8 Project, one of my goals has been to increase minimum sentences regarding human trafficking cases. I am truly honored to be here today to share part of my story with you. Thank you all for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.