

March 13, 2007

Good afternoon, Senator Harris, Representative Villano, and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Heidi Voight and I am Miss Connecticut 2006. I'm here today to testify in support of SB1343: An Act Concerning Compassionate Care for Victims of Sexual Assault. As Miss Connecticut, my official service platform is entitled "Educate, Empower, Eradicate: Stop the Violence," and seeks to address the issue of sexual assault through primary prevention while advocating for victims rights. This issue is of paramount importance to me because I am a survivor of both childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault as a teen. I have spent the past five years and will spend the rest of my life advocating for the rights of rape survivors because I understand firsthand what it is like to have my power and control taken away from me in an act of violence. I am empathetic to the plight of rape survivors because I too have suffered at the hands of those who lacked human decency and respect for my very humanity; I know this reality because I have lived it. I am here today to give voice to those who suffer in silence and shame so that they might be treated with the respect and compassion they are owed by those whose duty is to care for them.

In following this issue, I have been dismayed at the way in which the heart of the matter seems to have been lost in a whirlwind of misinformation. I have been disheartened, even insulted to witness a campaign of factually false information employed to distract the public from the truth. I see this becoming a debate of irreconcilable ideologies and abstractions, and I fear that we are losing sight of what this issue is truly about: a woman, or a girl, sitting quietly in a hospital bed somewhere, shaking, terrified, numb, beaten, bloody, alone... and wondering. And I can assure you with authority that she is not wondering about frivolous abstractions. She is more occupied with the immediate, tangible reality that has been slammed upon her world, and the ticking clock running out. By coming to a hospital she has placed her faith in the hands of an institution -whose sole purpose for existence is to provide immediate care for the wounded and sick- to do its job. As a publicly funded institution, every single hospital has an obligation, a duty, to comply with medical standards by putting the beliefs and needs of its patients first, without exception or excuse.

It is clear to me that those who are shouting loudest against this bill are **not** people whose lives have been permanently altered by rape. I believe that because nobody in their right mind who fully understood the scope of the rape experience would be so heartless as to dehumanize victims in the way that I've been witnessing in this debate. By shifting focus away from the realities of the rape experience to intangible ideological debates, the real issue is kept a comfortable, safe distance away. Meanwhile, rape victims are waiting for us to get to the point and restore their rights.

In a single act of sexual violence I had my innocence robbed, my body wounded, my soul devastated, my life permanently altered- my power and control over my physical, mental and spiritual self taken from me. My basic rights as a human being were taken away. I could not talk. I could not walk. All I could do was convulse and cry and be terrified. Unless you have experienced it yourself, you cannot understand the feeling of utter

helplessness a rape victim feels in the aftermath, viscerally and spiritually. But what you can do is give her back her basic human dignity when she looks to you for help by letting her decide what care she wants to receive. And if the thought of restoration of basic human rights to rape victims makes you uncomfortable or outraged, my recommendation is to redirect that outrage towards a much more worthy recipient: those who would degrade and assault women and teen girls. And if you really want to understand what it is to be “forced” to do something you’re not comfortable doing, I can tell you who to ask: any rape victim. You can start with me.

I stand here today in support of this bill asking you to not let the voices of survivors like me get lost in the din of abstractions and assumptions. So-called “solutions” that are rooted in assumptions are not solutions so much as they are an easy way for the opposition to absolve their guilt and pass the burden back onto the shoulders of the victims. Don’t assume that a woman has her own car waiting out back to get to the next hospital an hour away. Don’t assume she has money for a taxi, or can just put her torn clothes back on to hop on the next city bus. Don’t assume that a woman who has been beaten within an inch of her life had a say in where the ambulance took her. Don’t assume that a woman has insurance to pay for emergency contraception at a pharmacy, that a pharmacy has stocked the drug; that a pharmacy is even open when she is racing against the clock, or that she, after being violated in the most intimate way, can stand in a paper hospital gown and announce her need next to someone who is there to buy cough syrup or allergy medicine. Do not add insult to considerable injury by denying her of compassionate care.

Plan B is not abortion. Plan B does not terminate a pregnancy. To intentionally ignore this fact and opt instead to selectively present misinformation to the public is unethical, irresponsible, hypocritical, and morally reprehensible. This is not an attack on religion. I have not devoted my life to fighting sexual assault because of religious intolerance. Rather, as a woman of faith, I do it to help those with broken wings learn how to fly again, and to do my part to help better humanity. To accuse this bill’s supporters of harboring an anti-Catholic agenda is a heartless, ignorant slap in the face to survivors like me. The only matter of faith that should concern any of us is simple: the faith that a victim has placed in the doctors and nurses to protect her, care for her and respect her wishes- it’s the same faith that citizens all over our great state have placed in our very capable legislators to protect them. On behalf of survivors of sexual assault in the state of Connecticut, I implore you to do the right thing by supporting SB1343.

Heidi Voight  
Miss Connecticut