

Testimony of
Ann Burke

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Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Sessions, and Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of creating awareness on the issue of dating abuse and prevention education efforts. I appreciate the opportunity to share my daughter, Lindsay's story, and the positive legacy that has come from her loss.

First, let me recognize other parents who share similar stories. My husband Chris is here along with Bill and Michele Mitchell from Maryland. Their daughter, Kristin, was attacked and brutally murdered by her boyfriend three weeks after her college graduation. And, Kim Davidson whose daughter Kari Ann was just 18 when she was killed by her abusive boyfriend. They are members of MADE (Moms and Dads for Education to stop dating abuse), a group that my husband and I co-founded along with Liz Claiborne. We advocate nationally that all middle and high schools teach a dating violence curriculum.

Today, I would like to tell you about my lovely daughter, Lindsay. Lindsay could easily be described as "the girl next door." She grew up on a small street in the suburbs, knowing all the neighbors and playing with all the children in the neighborhood. She had plenty of friends, took dance and piano lessons, played soccer, tennis, and graduated from St. Mary's Academy and Rhode Island College with a degree in elementary and secondary education. Her many friends would often describe her as having a sweet and compassionate nature.

My daughter met her killer by chance at a wedding. In this two year relationship, her father and I noticed things in Lindsay that didn't seem quite right, including a change in her personality but we didn't know the cause at first. As the police would later describe, it was a classic case of abuse and that every form of abuse (verbal, emotional, sexual, and physical) was used.

Let's not overlook the strong correlation between stalking and intimate partner murder. Until after Lindsay's death, I did not know that 76% of women murdered by an intimate partner had been stalked by that intimate partner, but only about half of stalking victims recognized the crime for what it was. Lindsay was no exception. After Lindsay left the boyfriend for the third time and was living with my son and his wife, Lindsay got calls constantly from him, according to cell phone records, more than 20 hours a week worth of calls. She was fearful and anxious. Earlier, he threatened to kill her.

She had the support of friends and family. Yet, after leaving him and trying to start a new life, Lindsay's life ended almost four years ago, when she was only 23 years old. The police statements and autopsy showed that she was brutally tortured and murdered by her ex-boyfriend. As Rhode Island Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch said after the sentencing, "I am hopeful that Lindsay's death will provide lessons for our teenagers that will prevent others from being victimized by dating violence. "

After Lindsay's murder, I spent many painful months researching this topic. Given the alarming statistics for dating violence, I began to wonder why we don't require educators to teach our children about the importance of healthy relationships and prevention of dating and domestic violence.

Over and over I asked myself, "if Lindsay was properly educated about this major health issue in health class, would she still be alive today?" I believe she would. I never learned about it while pursuing my degrees in nursing, secondary education, or my graduate degree in health education. As a result, in my 24 years of being a school nurse and health teacher in a middle school, I never addressed it with my students. I have since learned that my lack of education on this topic is more the norm in our country rather than the exception. As a teacher, I realized we have school policies for bullying and sexual harassment, and we teach our students and our staff about these issues. I strongly believed that the same needed to be done for dating violence.

I believe that if my daughter was taught about dating violence from middle through high school and if we as parents knew ALL the facts as well and reinforced this information at home, she would still be with us. Having known Lindsay, a confident and assertive young lady who always spoke her mind, who didn't hesitate to change friends in high school when some of them started drinking alcohol, who didn't hesitate to seek help from her guidance counselor when needed, and from the school principal when she thought something unfair was occurring, wouldn't she have been more careful about a safety plan and seeking proper help if she had heard about all of this before and had some frame of reference in her mind from prior learning? Knowing my daughter, I believe she would have been. And now we will never know for sure.

How many more daughters have to lose their lives at the hands of an abusive partner? How many more teens have to suffer in an abusive relationship, fearing for their lives, and yet afraid to tell anyone? The teen dating violence statistics are alarming. Teen dating violence is a major health problem that leads to other health problems: substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, and suicide. Recent research has found a strong connection between violence among young people and poor reproductive health outcomes. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that one in three U.S. high school girls who has been abused by a boyfriend has become pregnant. By reducing dating violence, we can reduce unintended teen pregnancies. The psychological effects on its victims are also devastating. Devastation I know all too well. Dating violence, the same as domestic violence, destroys and sometimes kills people. How can we ignore this major health problem any longer?

In 2006, my family founded the Lindsay Ann Burke Memorial Fund to address dating violence primarily through education. Through our workshops, we have trained 224 health teachers from 89 schools in Rhode Island. We have donated over \$40,000 worth of curriculum to these schools,

and through our workshops for general school staff we have trained well over 1,000 teachers so far.

More recently, Rhode Island legislators showed foresight and took a stand by passing the Lindsay Ann Burke Act with the support of Attorney General Patrick Lynch. Rhode Island now mandates annual dating violence education for students in grades 7 - 12 through our comprehensive health education curriculum, training in this topic for school staff in middle and high schools, a school district policy to address episodes of dating violence at school and at school events, and the law strongly recommends parent training.

Episodes of dating violence at school in Rhode Island will no longer be ignored. Teens, school staff, and parents will now get the education on this topic that they rightfully deserve. An interesting thing happens when you educate all three groups, teens, school staff, and parents at the same time. Everyone begins to talk openly about this topic, removing the shame and stigma that now exists. This helps teen victims to come forward and seek help; it gives teens the knowledge and skills to help each other; and it helps parents to reinforce this information at home with their teens and watch for signs of unhealthy relationships. And abusers, once educated, may think twice about their own behavior and seek ways to change.

Since passage of the Lindsay Ann Burke Act in Rhode Island, we have gotten support from both the National Association of Attorneys General and the National Foundation for Women Legislators. They have partnered with us in our effort to support Lindsay's law and to pass dating violence education in all states. As a result of their efforts, several states have passed laws, with bills pending in other states. However, I want to point out that some have been watered down due to lack of funding for implementation.

Funding and leadership from the federal level is needed for comprehensive dating violence education for all teens. The last VAWA bill created the STEP program (Supporting Teens through Education and Protection Act) that would support training in schools, but it has never received funding. This funding is exactly what states and school districts need to implement dating violence education laws.

And this is more critical in light of a survey released this morning by the Family Violence Prevention Fund and Liz Claiborne that says American teens are experiencing alarmingly high levels of abuse in their dating relationships. At the same time, the survey found parents are out of touch with the level of teen dating violence and abuse among their teens. The large majority of abused teens are not informing parents, and even when they do, most stay in abusive relationships. This highlights the need to start funding for STEP. To do anything less, is selling our children short. We should not delay with our children's health and lives.

In addition, other programs authorized in VAWA, such as the Services to Advocate for and Respond to Youth Grant Program (STARY), the Children and Youth Exposed to Violence Grant Program, and Engaging Men and Youth Program have received a small amount of funding. These programs need to be fully funded. The Engaging Men program is an important part of making clear that men and boys are critical as part of the solution to ending violence. As one established model, the Family Violence Prevention Fund runs the Coaching Boys into Men

program to engage athletic coaches to help shape the attitudes and behaviors of young male athletes.

I commend Chairman Leahy for authoring the Improving Assistance to Domestic Violence Victims Act which strengthens dating violence provisions, and I urge the full Senate to quickly pass this bill.

And so I ask, how many more daughters have to lose their lives at the hands of an abusive partner? How many more teens have to suffer in silence in an abusive relationship fearing for their lives?

The time to go beyond awareness is now! Senators, give our youth the education they deserve. Every teen has a right to know this information--ALL the facts. Education gives power, the power to recognize an abusive relationship and help ourselves and others. By fully funding these programs, you will help educate our youth. This can and will save lives. It's the right thing to do; it's long overdue. If we wait, teens will continue to suffer in silence and the loss of life will continue. This is unacceptable. We can help them. You can help them. The time to educate a nation is NOW. Thank you.