

Brandi Dredge
St. Joseph
LD 1185

Testimony in Support of LD1185

Presented to the Maine Joint Judiciary Committee | March 31, 2025

Good morning, Chair Carney, Chair Kuhn, and Distinguished Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of LD1185 to end child marriage. My name is Brandi Dredge. I live in St. Joseph, Missouri. I am an author, a teen mom, a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor who proudly speaks here today alongside Unchained at Last and my fellow members of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage as a Survivor Ally.

When I was sixteen, I met a twenty-four-year-old man, who lived with some boys in my high school, and with stars in my teenage eyes, I believed he hung the moon. Four months later, I was pregnant, and a year after that, I was begging my mom to give parental consent for me and my boyfriend to get married after the attorney representing him on criminal theft charges suggested we do so before the sentencing.

Since my boyfriend was a persistent and prior felon, the attorney wanted to use the marriage in the arguments for leniency on his sentence to show the judge he was a changed man, a family man with a new wife and baby. In 1997, at seventeen, I became his bride; he was twenty-five, and his prison sentence was suspended.

Over the next nine years, the statistics surrounding child marriage, such as the high likelihood of poverty, lack of further education, and enduring many forms of abuse, would ring true in my marriage in addition to the fact that I had married a sexual predator, which was something I struggled to see even after the sheriff leading the sex crime investigation said the only difference between me and the other girls he had abused was that he married me and I had evidence of the crime, our son's DNA. In 2007, we got divorced, and he was convicted of two counts of statutory rape. One of those counts of statutory rape is for the crime he committed against me.

It has taken me a lot of years to finally see, accept, and say I am a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor. I lost my childhood, and along the way, I lost myself. I rationalized many bad things under the guise of marriage; I couldn't see them as clearly as the sheriff, the prosecutor, and the judge could, which is why I am here today. To help others see what I couldn't.

Hindsight is a powerful tool; it enables us to reflect on the past and make more informed decisions for ourselves and others in the future. With hindsight, I can see I was vulnerable. Manipulated. Groomed. I can see how the long-term effects of abuse have played out in my life and my children's. I can see how old mindsets and generational trauma distort our decision-making and feed the cycles of abuse. I can see the guilt my mother carries because when she signed, she believed she was doing the right thing for me and my son. We can look back at that starry-eyed teen and say that it wasn't the right thing, and I am sorry no one protected you, but, hindsight isn't what the seventeen-year-olds in 2025 and the years beyond that who maybe in similar situations have; they only have the right now, the present and the adults that are in this room who can clearly see the alarming statistics, the risks that far outweigh the benefits who have the power to do the right thing and pass this bill to protect them from being entered into a marriage contract before they have all the legal rights of adulthood.

Thank you for your time.

Brandi Dredge