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Testimony in Favor of LD613: An Act to Amend the Maine Death with Dignity Act to Ensure Access by Qualified Patients

Thank you members of the Committee – I appreciate the opportunity to present today.

My name is Sarah Spangler Pfeiffer McCarthy and I live in Bangor.

When my father, Rob Pfeiffer, received his initial diagnosis in 2016, he reassured those closest to him that prostate cancer was among the most common and treatable types of cancer.

During his combat service as a Marine in the Vietnam War, he earned both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star, but it seems his fatal foe was Agent Orange which exacerbated his prostate cancer. Even with rigorous treatment, the cancer spread.

I went with my dad to many of his medical appointments. I listened to conversations he had with his doctors so I could understand not just his treatments and prognosis, but his goals and desires for what was becoming clear he would need – end-of-life care. That's where I first heard him mention death with dignity. If he qualified to use the law, he said he would use it.

Two days before the law went into effect in our state on September 19, 2019, my dad received a terminal diagnosis. The cancer had metastasized and spread to his lower spine. There was no stopping it. Now it was a matter of when, and how, my dad would die.

He could have undergone additional rounds of chemo. He explored the option of surgery. But an oncologist surgeon who met with him told him surgery was not the way to go. She was also a former lacrosse player – my dad was Bowdoin’s first-ever All-American in the sport – so in addition to bonding about their shared passion for the sport, she fully understood how devastating it was for him to not be as physical as he once was. She made him feel supported and heard, especially when he told her about his desire to access Maine’s assisted dying law.

My dad knew he wanted to initiate the process right away. His oncologist leapt into action, bringing on a staff member to work with my dad – and others in the same situation – and partnering with another provider to help patients access the law.

My dad qualified to use the law. He was one of the first people in Maine to initiate the process and ultimately the first in Maine to die using it.

He chose November 29, the day after Thanksgiving, to take the death-hastening medication.

Two days before that, my dad and stepmother drove four hours round-trip to pick up the medication.

Thankfully for my dad, the required steps and waiting periods were not a problem. I can understand how, for others further along in their health decline, it would be excruciating and unnecessary to have to wait.

Seeing first-hand how diligent my dad’s medical providers were as soon as the law went into effect over five years ago, I implore you to allow them to do their job and fully and expeditiously honor their patients’ choice.

I fully support this amendment.