

Matilde Simas Testimony April 28, 2024

Good afternoon,

Sen. Beebe-Center, Rep. Hasenfus, and members of the CJPS committee, my name is Matilde Simas and I am testifying in support of LD 1695.

I'm a documentary photographer and for the ten years I've worked internationally with nonprofits addressing human trafficking—to help raise awareness. And again and again, I would hear the same phrase: "*That doesn't happen in the United States.*" But it does. That widespread disbelief is what moved me to begin a film here in Maine. I wanted to show that if human trafficking can happen in a quiet state like ours, it can happen anywhere in the country.

Woman Rising started as a film about human trafficking, but what I found as I worked closely with one survivor, Cary, is that it's also a story about the power of one person seeing you clearly—maybe for the first time.

Cary endured years of sexual exploitation. Like so many others, she didn't recognize herself as a victim. She thought it was her fault. And for years, the systems around her reinforced that belief. She was treated like a delinquent, not a person in crisis.

But then, one day, she met an officer who saw her differently. He didn't judge her. He asked questions. He listened. And he said something simple—but life-changing: "*What's happening to you isn't your fault.*" That officer helped Cary see herself not as someone broken, but as someone worth protecting. She credits him with saving her life.

That moment changed the course of my project. I thought I was telling a trafficking story, but I realized I was also documenting an extraordinary example of policing done right. An officer who responded not with suspicion, but with empathy. Who didn't punish—but protected. That kind of response shouldn't be rare—it should be the norm.

I've also worked with law enforcement in Maine, and I've seen firsthand how many officers want to do better. They just need the right training, the right tools, and the right protocols to do so. That's why this bill matters. It creates space for exactly the kind of response that saved Cary's life. It helps law enforcement recognize red flags, understand trauma, and treat victims with the care and dignity they deserve. It's a bridge—between the survivor and the system, between the trauma and the healing.

Woman Rising is one story—but it represents so many more. Human trafficking isn't just "somewhere else." It's here. And how we choose to respond makes all the difference. Thank you for your time—and please, support this bill.

Matilde Simas
Advocate Photographer
(617)750-1182
mattie@capturehumanity.com