

Mary Lou Warn
Winslow

Good morning

My name is Mary Lou Warn, I live in Winslow with my husband and 2 children, Carly, a senior in High School and Jake, a student athlete in college. I am testifying today in support of LD 1550 to end the sale of all flavored tobacco products.

I started advocating 4 years ago with the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network when I realized my then 17-year-old son was vaping. I quickly learned how big tobacco companies targeted our youth with their relentless e-cigarette marketing campaigns. Jake is the quintessential story of the success of an industry that preyed on him – they duped him into believing these were harmless products that were just flavored water vapor.

When Jake was in elementary school he would come home and tell me all about how bad smoking was. I never thought he would use tobacco products and I believed we, the adults, did our job. Instead we let our guard down.

I was surprised to learn that the state had done little to educate Maine parents and children about the harm of these dangerous products. Meanwhile vape shops popped up all over town, school bathrooms became known as vape rooms and students had trouble getting through the day without a nicotine fix. Jake tried to assure me he had done his research and had this under control, he could stop anytime.

Jake went off to college to study business entrepreneurship and play D2 soccer. His dream. I made a surprise visit in the fall, driving 5 hours to see him play soccer. I found him in the cafeteria with a big group of friends. He had so much to tell me and I was excited to hear it all. He was doing great! He said “I’m figuring this out Mom”.

I sent him an email after his winter break when I realized his nicotine addiction was taking over. He was having sleep issues, morning headaches, dry mouth, bloody noses, coughing, trouble breathing, and bad looking teeth, along with trouble focusing, patience, and memory. His bank account was dwindling and he was making expensive purchases at 7-Eleven, a quick walk from campus. He needed to know I was on his side and I wanted to help and when he was ready I wanted to have an honest conversation.

When I visited him in the spring, I hardly recognized him and without his big smile. He was agitated, depressed, distracted and unhealthy. At breakfast he didn’t eat and felt sick. Both my husband and I made excuses. It’s getting close to finals, his coach is working him too hard, his knee is bothering him, the food is bad. Then it hit us like a ton of bricks, he’s vaping.

It took an all-hands-on-deck approach to support Jake in battling his addiction. My husband and I were in agreement, while we wanted to support him “leaving the nest” we could not send him back to college in the fall knowing he would fall deeper. Our relationship was being tested, and it wasn’t easy to get Jake on board. He needed to be ready and he needed more help than we could give him. When trying to help my son quit, I found little information readily available. I reached out to anyone who I thought could provide some insight on how to best support Jake.

It took years for him to stop using, and even today, when life gets stressful, I worry that the addiction will win. Jake describes his addiction as a toxic artificial love. He will say he can still remember his favorite vape flavor, a Red Bull flavor called Energetic Bull. It’s been 3 years and he can still taste it every time he thinks about it.

I am angry at this industry that profits off hooking kids, when they should be held accountable for the problem they created. When I hear “he’s an adult and can make his own choices, what can you do?” my response is “I am still his parent and I will do whatever needs to be done to protect him from danger.” So here I am battling this giant, the tobacco industry. The state has an important role in protecting public health, and that includes the health of our youth. We must keep our promise to our kids and

protect them from these dangerous addictive products.