

Testimony In Support of Senate Bill 54

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Karen Williams

My name is Karen Williams. I am a public school teacher from Beaverton, Oregon. I am in support of Senate Bill 54. When you hear my story, I think you will understand why.

My husband, David Williams, and I have raised 2 fine sons to adulthood. This is our oldest, Loren Williams, at 22 years of age. Loren graduated from Beaverton's Arts & Communication Magnet Academy in 2001. He was a fine cello player. He played with both the Portland Youth Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Youth Symphony organizations.

In each of his 4 years of high school, Loren was appointed by the ACMA teaching staff to serve as the student representative to his school's Site Council. That was a school policy-making committee made up of select staff, administrators, community members and 2 students. His senior year, he was elected by the entire student body to be the first ever Student Body President of the Arts & Communication Magnet Academy. Loren was loved and respected by everyone who knew him.

After graduation, Loren left to study industrial arts at Arizona State University. We hugged and waved goodbye to a confident, optimistic young person anxious to take his place in the world. He dreamed of coming back to Oregon after graduation - to design for Nike or Ziba Design. He spoke often to his friends about his "Eden" - an old growth forest called Opal Creek. He proudly called himself a "Certified Oregon Tree Hugger." Loren had become his own man, and we trusted him to live his own life without constant influence from his parents.

This portrait was taken on Loren's last visit home. On December 30, 2005, my husband and I got the phone call that every parent dreads. Our beloved son had been killed instantly in a traffic accident 2 blocks from his home.

After our loss, life for our family became a blur of arrangements and obligations. With the loving support of extended family and friends, we somehow stumbled through it.

Then, 6 months later, after all the well-wishers had left and we were faced with "Life must go on," we began to hear from Loren's college and high school friends - many of whom we had never even met. They were telling us of a wonderful website where friends had posted loving remembrances of our son. On it, they had written of how much Loren had meant to them and how much they missed him. It was on a

website called "Facebook." We had never heard of it and didn't even know what to call this sort of thing.

You have to understand; back in 2006 Facebook wasn't the entity it has become today. It was offered only on a few university campuses, and you had to have an "edu" email address to use it. Our son couldn't have "friend-ed" us even if he wanted to. That time was before Memorial Pages had even been conceptualized. Loren's friends wanted us to see the site. They taught me how to log on. Several people gave us their own personal passwords so we could access his profile page anytime we wanted.

It was a wonderful comfort to his grieving family! You see we didn't have a shoebox full letters from his closet like one might have had in years past. Loren had chronicled his life on his Facebook account. That was the only asset we had from him. It was priceless to us, his family.

Soon after, I learned it was Facebook's policy to shut down an account within 30 days of its owner's death. It became my mission to keep Loren's profile page up - at least until the important first year anniversary date of his death. My thinking was it would give his friends a "place to go." I got a hold of Facebook and begged them to keep it up. They said they would not. They told me the reason was that there would be no one to supervise the account for inappropriate postings.

I took them at their word and set out to solve the problem. I talked to his roommates. Did they know his password? One roommate suggested a possible password, "Opal Creek". It worked!

Now, for the first time, we could go into Loren's own account. We saw wonderful photos, many files and read precious emails - all in his own words. It was further evidence of the fine young man Loren had grown to become. Here were Loren's priceless assets - a treasure beyond words to loved ones left behind.

I contacted Facebook. Triumphant, I announced, "Problem solved. I can now supervise the account myself." Within 2 hours, Facebook changed the password. I had only been able to visit it twice.

After more pleading, they finally said we could have access if we got a court order. That meant we had to hire a law firm and bring a lawsuit against Facebook. It ended up being a 9-month battle, back and forth - our lawyer against theirs.

In the end we did get the court order. But, Facebook never did give us access to Loren's account. All we got was an edited screen shot of his profile page, a couple of photos and an edited document of his emails. It was sent to us as an email attachment from Facebook.

To this day, we have no idea what we lost as a result of their editing - a precious glimpse into our son's life, a treasured asset that can never be replaced.

Sadly, our story is not unique. Think about your own life. It's not just about Facebook. How many internet accounts do you have that you have to use a password to access?

You and everyone will eventually die. You and everyone will at some time be faced with the challenge of preserving the assets of their "e-lives" or that of their loved ones.

The development of technology has reached warp speed. The laws regarding its use in our daily lives need to catch up. Oregon has the opportunity to be a leader in our nation to meet the needs of its people. Will you please help the citizens of Oregon? Will you, please, give us a "**Loren's Law**" to protect our digital assets after death?