

Shannon Riggs

Salem, OR 97304
503-884-2522
shannon.riggs@yahoo.com

March 7, 2019

Re: Support for HB 3180

Dear Chair Keny-Guyer, Vice Chair Noble, and Members of the House Committee on Human Services and Housing,

I am the author of a children's picture book about childhood sexual abuse, *Not in Room 204*, which won the Oregon Book Award for Children's Literature in 2008. I am also a survivor of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by my father, starting when I was five years old and going on for years. I am writing in support of HB 3180, which I understand would help Oregon schools fully implement Erin's Law, which passed in 2015 and requires schools to teach children about sexual abuse. Importantly, HB 3180 will increase funding for the Oregon Department of Education to provide resources to develop and deliver this curriculum to children throughout Oregon.

In my book, Regina, a little girl in Mrs. Salvador's class, is being sexually abused at home. Regina comes to trust her teacher through the school year. Mrs. Salvador provides the kind of instruction Erin's Law promotes, as shown in this brief excerpt:

In February, Mrs. Salvador read a book about stranger danger, the same lesson they'd had every year since kindergarten. *Don't talk to strangers*. The children in Room 204 slouched in their seats. *Don't get in a car with someone you don't know. A stranger should not touch you anywhere a bathing suit covers*. They'd heard it all before.

"I want to talk to you about something else." Mrs. Salvador closed the book. "Knowing about stranger danger is important," she said. "But it's not always strangers who touch children in ways they shouldn't be touched. Usually, it's someone the child knows."

The children in Room 204 sat up straight.

"It could be a friend, a babysitter, or someone in your own family. It happens more than most people think." Mrs. Salvador sighed.

Regina Lillian Hadwig felt very small and far away.

Amanda raised her hand. "Has it ever happened to a kid in this school?"

"Yes. More than one."

"Has it ever happened to a kid in your class?"

Regina Lillian Hadwig stared at the clock. She watched the second hand click through its slow circle.

"I would never tell other students such a private thing, but I can tell you this. If someone told me this happened to them, I know *exactly* what to do to help."

In the end, of course, Regina tells Mrs. Salvador her secret, and Mrs. Salvador helps. In the 10+ years since this book was published, I have heard from many school counselors and teachers who shared that reading this book to their students frequently prompts disclosures. It gives me great satisfaction to know that my book has helped make children safer. I am not writing to promote my book, though. There are a number of excellent books and resources available. Whichever resources are used, I am writing because we need to improve education about child sexual abuse to keep children safe.

Though we have made advances in recent years, our society is still largely ignorant about the prevalence of child sexual abuse, about who perpetrates sexual abuse, and about the social, emotional, psychological, and physical problems sexual abuse causes. The most damaging ignorance, though—and the one least addressed by the literature—is the false belief that virtually all parents hold: *If something as horrific as childhood sexual abuse happened to my child, I would know. My child would tell me, or I would at least be able to tell that something was wrong.*

The fact, though, is that the vast majority of children *do not tell* when they have been sexually abused.

Studies show that for a child to report that he or she has been sexually abused is exceedingly rare, whether the child is a toddler abused by a babysitter, a school-aged child abused by a family member, or a teen abused by a trusted family friend. Most children do not tell – and this is why we need Erin’s Law to be fully implemented.

Why don’t children tell?

What most adults don’t realize is that children facing sexual abuse and assault have many compelling and persuasive reasons not to tell. Those reasons include overt or implied threats by the abuser, a desire to protect the family unit, a desire to protect younger siblings, a lack of vocabulary to express what’s happened, psychological dissociation, and self-blame—as well as many other influential reasons.

How will Erin’s Law help?

Many adults believe that children should be protected from hearing about sexual abuse. While this instinct comes from a loving place, it is severely misguided and actually makes children far less safe. All of Oregon’s children deserve to be safe. Responsible adults must ensure their safety, even if doing so makes us a little uncomfortable. This is part of being a grown-up. We do the things we have to do, even when sometimes we’d rather not.

One in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they reach age 18. About half of this abuse happens to children under 8 years old. Young children lack understanding of what is happening to them and often literally do not have the words to tell. **Education fixes that.** Abused children of all ages feel isolated and believe they have compelling reasons to stay silent. **Education fixes that, too.** Abusers isolate their child victims behind walls of threats, fear, and intimidation. **Erin’s Law will break down those barriers and make Oregon’s children safer.**

Erin’s Law will also help Oregon’s future

Childhood sexual abuse is horrific when it happens. Also troubling are the long-lasting effects of child sexual abuse. Left untreated, survivors of childhood sexual abuse suffer physical, social, emotional, and psychological problems that can last an entire lifetime, including the following: depression; eating disorders; obesity; drug and alcohol abuse; sexually transmitted diseases; unintended pregnancies (approximately 60% of first teen pregnancies occur in girls with sexual abuse histories); poverty; post-

traumatic stress disorder; anxiety disorders; increased physical ailments, such as migraines, back pain, chronic fatigue, and higher rates of cancer; relationship problems; incarceration; and even suicide.

Measuring the human suffering of sexual abuse victims is impossible, but we can get a sense of the economic price we all pay when we consider the medical expenses faced by those trying to recover from sexual abuse, the costs of social programs designed to treat the symptoms, and the lost productivity we all suffer when 21% of our population is coping with the trauma of sexual abuse instead of pursuing other callings. The costs of an educational program are well worth these financial savings, never mind the savings of personal suffering.

Research shows that when childhood sexual abuse is detected and responded to correctly and expediently, victims are far more successful in avoiding the damaging physical, social, emotional, and psychological aftereffects of sexual abuse. Furthermore, most child sex abusers have more than one victim, so when child sex abusers are identified, they can be prevented from abusing other children.

I could write and speak for hours about this important public health issue. If I can provide any additional testimony or answer any questions, I would be pleased to be of service. I urge you to pass HB 3180 to fully implement Erin's Law. Oregon's children are depending on responsible adults to help them.

Thank you for your service to Oregon.

Sincerely,

Shannon Riggs