

February 19, 2015

Dear Alaska Legislators,

When I was eight years old, my mother found out the secret I was keeping - that I had been sexually abused by her brother. While he was arrested and served a few months in jail for his crime, the impact was irreversible. Not only did I struggle with depression, PTSD, and suicide for decades, but my family suffered too. On top of trying to help a child dealing with issues much more adult than she should have to, they were financially, socially and emotionally impacted themselves. The consequences of abuse are not limited to the abuser and the victim.

What I struggled with most as a teenager was in coming to the understanding that my abuse was 100% preventable. Others knew my uncle had harmed other children. They were too afraid to speak up. Other children who were abused didn't speak up until they were adults. I can only guess that there are more who never spoke out at all.

As a Tlingit and Dena'ina woman, I grew up to understand what the terrible epidemic of sexual abuse was doing to our communities and our people. The strength of our people is eroded with each act of abuse, and we must do everything we can to stop it. I wrote a play about the topic, *Our Voices Will Be Heard*, to be produced by Perseverance Theater next year. It is meant to encourage others to speak up about abuse they suspect, witness or know about. I know from decades of personal experience that speaking up about abuse can make all the difference.

With this in mind, educating our children about the dangers of sexual abuse is not only wise, but vital. We find it important to teach our children about wearing helmets and bicycle safety. Yet 12 times the number of children are impacted by sexual abuse over biking injuries, yet we do virtually nothing to warn them about the dangers. Just as we teach children about the importance of bike helmets, safety vests, or even first aid, we need to empower them with knowledge they can use to protect themselves.

I wholeheartedly support HB 44 – Erin's Law, and any other measure to protect Alaska's children. I urge you to pass this bill, and to do so as soon as possible.

I thank you for making such a difference for our children.

*Gunalchéesh,*

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