

**Proponent for HB2345
House Judiciary Committee**

Chair Humphries and members of the committee,

My name is Stephanie Coleman. My son Matthew John and I are here to provide a small snapshot into our lives with regards to guardianship. I am a fierce advocate for my son, who was diagnosed with autism in 2009. Unfortunately, I was not always as knowledgeable on topics such as guardianship (and alternatives to guardianship such as supported decision making) as I am today.

Because of that, during Matthew's junior year in high school, I fell for the suggestion that I needed guardianship of Matthew when the school told me 'UNLESS you have guardianship of him, we can't share information with you anymore or have you attend his IEP meetings.' They didn't tell me about alternatives, like a release of information, so I sought guardianship of him.

He never needed guardianship. Does he need guidance and support like the rest of us? Yes. Did we practice that support for him as he was growing up? Yes.

Fast forward to 2019. Matthew was accepted and went off to college in another state. He lived on campus, and he found support to help navigate all the parts of the college experience. He also always had me on standby text... which he used often.

Guardianship is about making life decisions for someone else. I didn't make decisions for him then, I don't now. If he has a big decision to make, he comes to me, he ask questions, I ask questions and we discuss. One of his favorites to discuss is electing all of you. He has close friends he talks with about decisions along with his Mimi whose opinion is very important to him.

As I became more knowledgeable on guardianship, I realized that he didn't need it and it would actually be detrimental to him if I wasn't around. We needed to start the process to remove guardianship. As I began researching, I realized the process wasn't going to be easy.

We decided it was best to wait until after he graduated college, so that we could use his success to take to the judge to show how well he does on his own. I am happy to share that as of June 2023, Matthew is his own person again in the eyes of the state.

Our experience is unique. We were able to show, that he wasn't incompetent and could make decisions on his own and it was easier than for most individuals to get the removal completed.

While this is our story, I know you will hear from others today that believe guardianship is a must and for some I don't disagree, but for many more they deserve the chance to make their own decisions right, wrong, smart or stupid and for that more families need to be offered the option to learn about Supported Decision Making... they aren't hearing it now.

I know, I work as a family advocate, I get calls asking about guardianship and our doctors receive requests for letters of support for guardianship. When they feel it's not necessary for a specific patient, the doctors ask me to reach out to the family to discuss Supported Decision Making. As I talk to parents and caregivers, I learn they aren't aware of this option. We need to change that... and you passing this bill will help do that!

Thank you for your time today!