

Jenny Gaynor
RI Bill H7858
In Favor Of

May 13, 2024

Dear Chairman and Members of the House Finance Committee,

Like a true Rhode Islander, I was born here, left for a brief moment of time back in my 20's, came back and I'm now raising my kids in this state. I was born in Newport and grew up in Portsmouth. I went off to college at the University of Rhode Island, where I studied elementary education. I am a former classroom teacher. I taught for over 20 years, most of that time in Rhode Island. Now I work as a Social Emotional Coach, helping children recognize and regulate their emotions....my attempt to be proactive in a world in the midst of a serious mental health crisis.

As a kid, I lived on Aquidneck Island, often traveling over all four of our local bridges. Our dentist was in Tiverton, so I often sat in the back of my parent's car, taking in the view as we drove over the old Sakonnet River Bridge. Back when I was about sixteen, I enjoyed meeting my friends at the old 99 cent movie theater in Bristol, often driving my parent's car over the Mt. Hope Bridge. I also have fond memories of helping my parents unwrap the tokens to throw in the basket as they went through the toll booths, heading towards Jamestown over the Newport Bridge and then later, unwrapping my own as I also traveled over the Jamestown Bridge back to school at URI after visits home. Each bridge is uniquely and beautifully designed, with an amazing view of our beautiful bay. The ride over the bridges certainly captures the essence of why we call this place "The Ocean State."

I also have fond memories traveling *under* the bridges. My parents had a boat that we kept on the Sakonnet River. We often went through the old railroad bridge and underneath the Sakonnet River Bridge, cruising to Third Beach or Cuttyhunk. Sometimes, we'd go the other way, under the Mt. Hope Bridge and Newport Bridge to head towards Block Island. To see our sailboat mast make it under these bridges without hitting was fascinating to me. From a kid's perspective, it was hard to believe until we felt like little ants, looking up at the toy cars traveling overhead. I see the same awe in my own kids' eyes these days, as we take our boat on trips around the bay. My husband and I want to share the same Ocean State experiences we

had as kids with our own children. We are lucky to live in such a beautiful place!

I never once thought about people falling or jumping off those bridges until about a year and 10 months ago. Sure...I'd heard of people jumping...stories of survival or unsuccessful rescues. But none of them hit home to me until I lost two friends within three months from bridge jumps in Rhode Island. Statistically that doesn't seem possible. But it is...two friends, three months, gone.

Let me tell you a little bit about my friends. They were both amazing women, educators, mothers and friends. We worked together as teachers but we were more than colleagues. Sowams School in Barrington is a really special place. I have worked in four different schools, in three different states, and I have *never* found a school like this. We call each other family. Some of us watched each other meet our significant others, get married and have children. Most of us have taught each other's kids. We related and understood the trials and tribulations of being full-time, working mothers. We covered for each other. We looked out for each other. And we always lent each other a helping hand. Walking down the halls during the most stressful days felt comforting because we were surrounded by the best colleagues and friends we could ever ask for. We spent a lot of time outside of school together, as well. We traveled, went out to dinner, joined each other at the local pool club or beach, often with our children in tow, soaking up as much of our school vacations home with our children as we possibly could. While many of my colleagues knew that both our friends struggled emotionally at times, none of us would have ever guessed they would take their own lives.

One July, almost two years ago, I was supposed to meet one of my colleagues for a walk. She called me to express that she wasn't able to enjoy a walk with me that day and we spoke for a while. But she sounded down....sad and without energy. I expressed my concern for her and asked if she needed me to visit with her. She said she didn't want to "bring me down." Despite my efforts to explain we're friends and life doesn't always have to be sunshine and roses, she refused my company. Alarms went off in my head after we hung up, so much so that I called her back. I asked her questions to be sure she wasn't alone. She assured me that she wasn't feeling well but her family was around her, supporting her. She even added a little bit about looking forward to a visit to the Cape the following week. She knew exactly what to say to assure me and I believed her.

That afternoon, I got a message through school email and texts among colleagues that someone close to us had passed away.

The next morning, we gathered together to learn that shortly after we spoke, my friend jumped and took her own life. My colleagues were shocked and devastated. I was numb. I was angry at myself because a little voice was telling me when I spoke to her the day before that she wasn't OK. Why didn't I listen to that voice? Why didn't I visit with her that morning? I could have prevented this....

The days and weeks that followed were a blur. We gathered together as a team. We checked in on each other. We hugged. We cried. And we did everything we could do to support each other, the friends and the family that she left behind. I felt guilty for resigning from my position at Sowams only weeks before all this happened. My colleagues had to return to school, feeling the absence of one of our friends. They had to support students through their grief, while trying to manage their own.

But then, only a few months later, the month of October arrived. School started and was in full-swing. My colleagues were getting to know their students and we were all managing to overcome our grief with good memories of the friend we lost.

In the midst of all this, we received a cryptic text and email ...Sowams was unexpectedly closing due to an emergency. Within minutes, my former colleagues were texting me, begging me to gather with them because the unthinkable had happened again. Another friend and teammate took her own life by jumping off a local bridge. This information socked me in the gut...broke my heart. How could this be? We just saw each other last week! The grief and sadness I felt overtook me. No one gets a free pass on grief, and I certainly wasn't the exception.

I really struggled. I saw my colleagues, my neighbors, my former students... all struggling. It was enough to handle my own grief, but to be confronted with so many others as emotionally devastated as I was seemed impossible. I hesitated to gather with my friends again in this way. I worried that being around others with the same heart ache as mine would magnify my pain. These were my friends, my co-workers and now, my co-grievors. The collective trauma in the town of Barrington was too much to bear.

I'm still struggling to wrap my head around losing two friends to suicide....to losing two friends off bridges that I have spent my life driving over, sailing under and admiring.

Through this traumatic experience, I have made a bold decision. I am channeling my grief and sorrow toward my new mission....to make mental health a priority, raise awareness, and advocate for building barriers on our local bridges.

I have to believe that my friends did not want to end their lives. I think they had one of many moments where their pain was so great and their situations so irreversible, that it felt difficult to imagine going on. So they jumped.

But I also have to believe that if they were faced with a barrier on that bridge, they would have been given a pause. They would have stopped to think about those they were leaving behind - how could they ever explain to them why they just gave up? I know, without a doubt in my mind, this is not what they wanted for any of us.

If they had a barrier they would have had a pause to reflect on the many examples they had seen in their lives of strength in hard times. The pause would have given them a chance to reflect on those hard times and not make the choice to jump to end their beautiful, valuable and loving lives.

My grief has brought me anger, it is part of the pain I feel. Part of my anger is not being able to forgive. To move past my anger, I've realized that I need to start practicing forgiveness.

I had to first forgive myself for things I did or didn't do. To move forward and heal, I've had to learn to let go of my guilt. I have to accept that I was the best friend I could have possibly been to both of these beautiful and amazing women.

Second, I have to forgive my friends for ending their lives, causing so much pain to those left behind. People say that suicide is an incredibly selfish act, without much thought of how that will affect the family, the friends, and the community they leave behind. I have learned how very untrue this statement is. Everyday, I talk to my friends. I tell them that I love them and with that love, comes my forgiveness.

Finally, I need to forgive you and many other decision and policy makers for dragging your feet when it comes to building barriers that could have saved my friends....that could have given them a moment to pause and reflect, to get help. How many people have to die before you'll do something? One is enough. Two is unthinkable. More than that? That's on you. And I know there have been so many....

This is something I have to choose everyday....choosing more positive and loving thoughts through my grief is what is getting me through right now. That's what I've been trying to do and it's not easy.

To work on my practice of forgiveness, I have some positive and loving thoughts for you today....

You all have loved ones, friends, people that love you. And you never want to see them make the choice that my friends made. I know you hope that if your loved ones ever feel like giving up, they will be given an opportunity to pause, reflect and seek support. And because I believe you have that hope, I have a hope too. It is no coincidence that hope is our state motto!

I hope that you will do whatever it takes to protect the people of Rhode Island in the near future. I have hope that you will do everything in your power to keep us and those that love you safe. I have hope that you will pass RI Bill H7858 this year. It is beyond time to spend the money and the resources to build a safety barrier on bridges in our state.

Thank you.

Jenny Gagnier