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HB2439

Proponent testimony: Blair Gordon

House Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice

Good afternoon, my name is Blair Gordon and I would like to share my story with you all today. I feel very honored to be here, and hope you will take some of the most impactful parts of my life to heart, and understand how very important it is not only for the victims of drunk driving, but for our entire community to enact harsher penalties for offenders. This cannot keep happening, and we must do something together to prevent such senseless tragedies.

I knew the Vogel's when I was just twelve years old. We were neighbors, and in that small neighborhood out in the middle of nowhere Kansas, we weren't just neighbors, but family. At the time, Caitlin was just a child but what I remember most about her is her fun vivacious personality, and her sweet, kind, giving heart. That part of her never changed, no matter the struggles she went through, and no matter the mountains she had to climb in life, she was always such an optimistic sweet girl. I had the honor of coaching Caitlin and her U-10 (under 10) soccer team for two years when I was in high school, and to this day I am still friends with many of those girls. Caitlin always had a passion for helping others, and she made it her duty to make sure those around her were happy, and never needed a thing. As we got older, our lives went on their own paths. I became a police officer, and carried out a ten year career as a law enforcement officer because it too, was my duty to help others especially those in need. Caitlin's path was to teach others in need, specifically children who were autistic. She had such a passion for life, and giving back every chance she could. We even took a class together at our local community college, and although our lives took different paths, we always stayed in touch.

I remember the day I heard of Caitlin's passing like it was yesterday. My son had just finished a tee ball game, and my partner and our family were in an ice cream shop getting everyone a cool treat after the hot summer game. In the middle of ordering, my mom called me and asked me in a panicked state if the girl who died in the accident was our Caitlin. I initially didn't even know there was an accident, and was sent into a state of horror. I quickly got off the phone to frantically check any news site that had information. That's when I saw her name, with a headline that read, "25 year old Stilwell girl killed in drunk driving accident". My heart sank, tears filled my eyes, and the pain that ravaged over my body hurt my soul. How could this happen? Why? I had so many questions, followed with mixed emotions of anger and confusion. I even remember thinking to myself; this can't be true, this can't actually be happening right now. I wanted so badly to be dreaming, and to just wake up. But I didn't; it was true. Our Caitlin was gone, because someone wanted to drink and drive AGAIN fully knowing the possible consequences of his actions. The following night I went to Caitlin's parents' house, and my stomach was in knots. I knew they'd be on their back porch as they always were on the summer nights, surrounded by friends. As I walked around the corner, there sat Kevin, Caitlin's father. His eyes were blood shot from crying and yet he still was able to put on a smile, and give me a big bear hug like he always does. And then I saw Pat. Caitlin's mother and best friend. My heart sank to my feet, I tried to be strong for them and not cry, but I couldn't keep the tears from flowing down my face. I held them both for a long time. I wanted so badly to take this pain away from them, but I couldn't. I couldn't give these two wonderful

people their daughter back. Their heart and soul back. We talked about Caitlin; we talked about how wonderful she was, and how much life she had left to live. We talked about how unfair it was that her life was so selfishly taken, and something lit a fire inside me. I had to do something for Caitlin, for her family, for her friends. For me. There had to be something good that came out of this, because that is what Caitlin did in her life. There was so much good that came out of anything that she touched. She would do this for me; she would do this very same thing that I am trying to do for anyone. We must enact a drastic change in our laws to help prevent things like this from ever happening again. This isn't how life is supposed to be. Parents aren't supposed to bury their children, and we aren't supposed to say goodbye to our 25 year old friends. We were all supposed to grow old together, living out the life that was intended for us. So I began to write emails to every single state representative I could find. And one by one, I met as many of them as I could. They were all so supportive, so kind, and so touched by Caitlin's life, and shared the anger in the tragedy of her passing. And with every meeting came another step forward in the right direction, which led me to Russ Jennings, State Representative of the 122nd district who shared our passion for making the laws fair, and just. It also led me to Capitan Mark Rokusek of the Johnson County Sheriff's Office, Greg Smith, father of Kelsey Smith, legal liaison with the Johnson County Sheriff's Office, and Sheriff Calvin Hayden of the Johnson County Sheriff's office who had all just gone through a similar drunk driving accident, involving their Deputy Brandon Collins, who was killed by yet another intoxicated driver on September 11th, 2016. We are all fighting for the same cause, and share the same unforgettable pain of losing someone we love and care for at the hands of someone who has committed such a senseless, selfish act. Together, we can help prevent other families and friends from going through the same fate as we have tragically been forced to go through. If we enact harsher penalties for repeat offenders, maybe they will think twice before getting behind the wheel while intoxicated. Maybe they will think twice before borrowing a friend's car, when they know they are supposed to have an intoxilyzer device in their own car. We have to do something, and this is one step in the right direction. There are so many more steps to be made, but by one step at a time in the right direction, we can help prevent such senseless deaths such as Caitlin's, Deputy Collin's, and so many others.

Thank you so very much for your time, your understanding, and your vote to make bill HB 2439 pass in honor of Caitlin Vogel, Deputy Collins, and many more victims from intoxicated driving.