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June 10, 2013

Hon. Michael J. Baumgartner
Ogemaw County Circuit Court
806 W. Houghton Avenue

Dear Hon. Judge Baumgartner,

I have been trying to find the words to write this letter for several weeks now. In July you will have the task of sentencing my husband, Neal Erickson. As you do this I would like to appeal to you to take a few things into consideration.

I do understand that seven years ago my husband made a very grave mistake through his illegal contacts with Cody. However, those mistakes stopped that same summer. As humans we all are susceptible to making bad decisions, but we also have within us the power to change and remedy things to the best of our abilities. He did everything in his power to change, and following the summer that he had illegal contact with Cody, it never occurred again with Cody, or any other student.

The irony of this situation is that Neal's actions were made public by an anonymous individual that simply wanted to embarrass the school district, and expose others. Cody never chose to share what had occurred and it is my opinion that that Cody did not and does not perceive himself to be a victim, nor is he living a life that has been negatively impacted by Neal's actions.

I knew Cody well as a student and have been in contact with him in recent years as well. I worked with him on over 10 theatrical productions during his high school career. I have written him letters of recommendation for high school and college, exchanged information about theatre events that we were involved in both here and away at college. In fact, I knew Cody long before I was in a relationship with Neal. He was a very dynamic and intelligent high school student. When Neal and I began dating he was delighted for us and in fact asked to come to our wedding. Both Neal and myself continued to be friends with Cody in the years after Neal's actions were committed. We, as a family, attended his graduation party. And from what he has shared with us over the past few years, Cody is now a very successful college student who is very much enjoying the life he is living and looking forward to a successful future.

I realize that your obligation is to make sure justice is done and that those before you are both rehabilitated and punished and the community is protected. I truly believe the community does not need protection from my husband. He has been an integral part of the community for 17 years. He has worked both within the local schools and at a local church and his efforts have made positive impacts upon thousands of people. And I knew this about him long before we were in a relationship or married. We worked together for many years as colleagues and then friends.

He made a huge mistake - but that should not define who he is. As for a punishment, because I know that is something the community expects, hasn't he been punished enough? He is losing a job he has held for 17 years and losing all future career potential as a teacher. He is losing his position in a community that he loved. He has lost his savings for the future. Going to prison can't punish him anymore than he has been already - but there is someone who will be punished if he is sent away - my daughter, Margaret.

Margaret just turned six this past October. She is a witty, clever, delightful kindergartener. Her biological father was an abusive alcoholic. We separated when she was two and a half. He moved back home to Ireland and she has only seen him twice in the last three and a half years. Neal and I began dating in the fall that she turned three. She started calling him "daddy" by Christmas that year and we have been a family ever since. He is the only dad she knows and he is amazing with her. They play games, go sledding, run around and play catch. He is loving, kind, and patient - everything a dad should be. The time Neal is going to be away will be devastating to our daughter Margaret.

I have worked in education for 15 years. I have seen many delightful students who have been damaged by horrible events in their lives. While I acknowledge that Neal's conduct with Cody was wrong, I do not believe he was damaged by Neal's actions and I base my opinion on my personal interaction with Cody, both before and after Neal's actions. However, Margaret very likely could be. Please don't punish her by his absence in her life.

Sincerely,



Toni Erickson