

**Position: In favor of this bill**

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Today I'm here to share my story of what happened one day in 2016 on the Mount Hope Bridge. I was driving back to Portsmouth with a friend and my dog in the car. As we approached the bridge, traffic heading into Portsmouth was backed up and moving slowly. I couldn't see what was causing the delay until we got closer to the center span. The vehicles in front of me and those coming into Bristol took turns driving around a parked vehicle.

I could see a man in the driver's seat, so I stopped behind his car to help. Inadvertently, this also stopped traffic long enough for him to get his door open and exit the vehicle. I quickly realized that this man wasn't having car troubles. He was there to jump off the bridge.

The wind chill temperature was below zero. It was extremely windy. My car rocked back and forth while the man struggled to remain standing with each wind gust. As he worked his way to the back of his vehicle, I used my car horn to get his attention and it did. He stopped, turned towards me and our eyes met. I could see the pain in his eyes. The look in his eyes is one of many things I will never forget about that day.

I started to talk to him thru my windshield. I could see the glazed over expression on his face start to dissipate as he tried to figure out if he knew who I was & what I was saying to him. However, the distraction was temporary. His eyes left mine and he started to make his way to the railing.

I opened my car door to get out. I wanted to maintain eye contact and keep talking with him, but the wind was so strong I decided to stay in the car. I hit my car horn a couple more times and asked my friend to open his window so I could talk to the man again. At this point he was squatting on top of the bridge railing while holding on to a tower cable with his right hand.

My friend opened his door to get out. He was going to try to grab the man off the railing. I remember lightly touching his arm & asking him to please stay in the car because it was too dangerous with the wind, possible ice, and no safety harness to guard against being pulled over the rail from the momentum of someone going over. My friend closed his door and remained in the vehicle.

The man was staring down at the water. I yelled out to him through the open window. He turned and looked into my eyes again. I asked him to please get down off the railing, which really is more like a large step that's less than 3 feet high. He said something to me that I couldn't hear and shook his head NO. Still in his squatting position, he turned his head and body back towards the water, let go of the tower cable, and pushed off the railing.

My eyes shifted from the empty railing towards my friend. I asked him if he was ok. He was in shock. He told me I messed up because I should have let him get out of the car. I called 911 and we remained on top of the bridge for another hour or so speaking with the police and filling out an incident report.

My friend and I didn't speak or see one another for over 2 weeks after this day. We've never really talked about it together. But months after the jump, he told me it's very possible I have saved HIS life that day by stopping him from getting out of the car. He said he has often thought about how easily he could have gotten pulled over the railing.

All these events and the aftermath have had a huge impact on me. After the jump I spent the next several months searching for answers and solace. I questioned every action & non-action I made that day. I felt guilt & sadness. I went over and over so many what ifs, should haves, and could haves in my mind.

I began publicly speaking about my experience. I read statistically significant research on bridge suicide. I talked to as many people as I could about the prevalence of suicide by bridge in our community; and the more I talked about it, the more people who came forward that knew someone or had family who died jumping off one of our state's bridges. I soon discovered that suicide from RI bridges happens far more often than what gets reported.

After hearing from an overwhelming number of people who courageously shared stories of losing loved ones to bridge suicide and wanted something done to make the bridges safe, I co-founded a coalition called Bridging the Gap for Safety & Healing in 2016. We are dedicated to advocating for the installation of safety barriers on RI bridges, raising awareness of suicide by bridge, suicide prevention, and supporting all survivors of those lost to suicide including families, loved ones, witnesses, first responders, and ultimately our entire community.

This man's death, and many others, could have prevented. Safety barriers eliminate easy access to a highly lethal means. Safety barriers do exactly what they're meant to do. They save lives.

I wholeheartedly request your full consideration and support by voting to pass House Bill #5053.

Thank you,

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