

**April 24, 2025**

**To The RI House Judiciary Committee  
Testimony In Support of House Bill 5909**

Hello, my name is Michelle Ross. Thank you for allowing me your time to give written testimony regarding my favor of House Bill 5909, which makes all causes of action based on sexual abuse or exploitation of a child not subject to any statute of limitations whether the claim has lapsed or was previously time-barred.

I would like to talk to you today in the name of my deceased brother, David Ross. Our mother raised us as Catholics even though she herself could not participate. The church had excommunicated her for having a tubal ligation, after having her sixth child. Still she felt it was important for us to go to church and have a religious upbringing including CCD classes and making the sacraments of Penance (confession), the Eucharist (Holy Communion), and Confirmation.

David was the fourth child and 1 year and 5 months older than me, the fifth child. As a young child he loved to play with his stuffed animals, as did I and please see the attached picture of us. David served as an altar boy at Our Lady of Lourdes Church, 901 Atwells Ave Providence, RI. I believe David felt a spiritual calling. He used to make homemade communion out of white bread, with the small insert of a doughnut maker; play church mass and give out his bread communion. I don't know of any other children that played this way but his love for religion was contagious and we played along. I remember David serving at the mass for my 1<sup>st</sup> communion and carrying a candle in procession. I admired my brother David and how he would later on be a lector at church. I too asked to be a lector later on, as part of my confirmation but also to mimic my brother. However, I never imagined I would be one of the lectors at his funeral mass.

David learned to play the clarinet in elementary school. I remember the music teacher asking me to try out too because I could use a different reed to play and share the same instrument. Unfortunately I didn't have the wind to pursue playing like he did. As David's love for music progressed he also practiced and sometimes played the organ at church. The pastor had given him a key to the church to go in and practice when he wanted to. One day I went with him and he taught me to play a song on the piano and I felt so very inspired by him! I often felt like I had a very special bond with David, almost like a twin or a nexus if you will. These are the innocent and happy memories that I can recall from our childhood involving the Catholic Church. Unfortunately there was a dark side to church at Our Lady of Lourdes Church that I was not aware of in my youth nor my early adult hood.

During David's time serving as an alter boy, he was sexually abused by priest Francis C. Santilli, who served at Our Lady of Lourdes from 1979 – 1980. David never told anyone about the abuse while it was happening. Many years later he told my mother and a sister about it. Later on David also switched his religion from Catholic to Episcopalian, in an attempt to still answer his calling but not have the horrid remembrances of Catholic priest abuse. He eventually became the assistant head of Acolytes and was an active member of the congregation of St. Stephen Church, 114 George St, Providence, RI 02906.

David worked for The Providence Center for Psychiatric Services, for nine years and during this timeframe put himself part-time through college to earn a BS in psychology in 1997, posthumously. He was outwardly doing okay and was in therapy and our family assumed he was working through his past child sexual abuse issues but later we found out that was not the case at all.

At that time the length of time a victim of childhood sexual abuse had to sue after reaching adulthood was only seven years and David had reached and passed his twenty-fifth birthday.

One year David was to have a Christmas party at his apartment and he'd called my sister Lynn about an hour before and was speaking nonsensically to her. Lynn drove over to his apartment, as she was concerned something might be wrong with him. When she arrived she found David in a strange and confused state and still not speaking with any sense. 9-1-1 was called and local fire dept and paramedics showed up. Lynn let them in the apartment and David went running up the back stairs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. When the paramedics tried to reach to him, David called out in a very scared voice: ARE YOU A CATHOLIC PRIEST?! Lynn convinced David they were not and only there to help him. David was taken to the hospital and my sister Lynn went with him. Later in hospital it was thought that he had a psychotic break.

Now I want to take you back to May 17, 1997 at University of Rhode Island. My whole family along with some personal friends had come to see David's graduation procession. However, we could not find him anywhere on the grounds or in hall. So my oldest sister Karen volunteered to drive back to his apartment in Providence and see if something had gone wrong. The rest of us split off into 2 cars and did the same. Well the most unimaginable happened and we where called to David's apartment. Upon driving up and seeing the coroner's van outside, my heart sunk and I just knew David was dead. He had a self inflicted gunshot wound to the head and my sister Karen was the one to find him in his bedroom on the blood spilled floor. The rest of the family, including our mother, was not allowed inside as the police could not allow it during their investigation. So the last memory I have of my dear brother David, is him be wheeled out on a gurney with heavy cloth strapped over him.

I know there are so many reasons one chooses suicide but I also believe the main contributing factor was the sexual abuse he suffered, never recovered from and not being able to go forward with lawful and legal actions after the then age of twenty-five. The statute of limitations on childhood sex abuse needs to be eradicated completely and individuals, as well as organizations like churches, need to be held fully and financially accountable.

House Bill 5909 will make it less enervating for victims of child sexual assault to file civil suit later in life, as is the norm during a recovery and therefore, should be passed.

Thank you for your consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Ross". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michelle Ross



