

I would like to start by thanking the House Health Committee for taking the time to hear testimony on this critically important topic. I deeply appreciate your willingness to hear from those of us affected by decision-making around vaccines.

My name is Christie Allen and I live in Shelburne, Vermont. Like all of you, I come here today with the experience of multiple roles. I have been a pediatric nurse for 17 years, a Vermonter, a mother of 2 young children, one of whom is Autistic, and as unlikely as it still feels, a cancer patient.

In July of 2012, I found a lump in my breast while doing a push-up. Two weeks later at the age of 32, I was diagnosed with invasive breast cancer. I have no contributing family history, no risk factors, and in fact had done “all the right things”. I had breast fed my children, taken vitamins, and eaten organic foods...all the things I knew to do to be healthy and well.

I remember being overwhelmed with fear as I stared down the path in front of me. I knew my treatment would mean multiple surgeries and chemotherapy. I wondered how I could afford to be off work, how bad the side effects of treatment would be, but mostly I

worried about how I would be able to parent my kids and even be present in their lives.

My son started Kindergarten the day before I had a mastectomy. I started chemotherapy a month later. I wondered how I could attend his class events and even pick-up and drop off for school safely. As a nurse, I knew I would essentially be without my immune system for months and that every vaccine I had had would no longer provide me immunity. This lack of immunity meant that while it seemed likely that my cancer diagnosis was not a fatal one, an infection very well could be life-threatening for me. For months I would wear a mask when taking my kids to the pediatrician's office. I would wear a mask during school pick-up. For nearly a year, I worked to strike a balance between limiting my exposure to bacteria and viruses and still parenting my children.

Because as any parent can tell you, parenting doesn't stop because you are sick; parenting is a high-stakes game with no do-overs and no sabbaticals. The entire point of my treatment was to allow me to be present in my children's lives and I refused to be less

than present for the 10 months I underwent chemotherapy and subsequent months it took my immune system to recover.

It was not without risk. My children's elementary school experienced a pertussis outbreak during my treatment, due to unvaccinated children attending. It reached a point where realistically, before a play date could happen, we had to ask other parents if their children were vaccinated. Having to ask questions like these were the only way we had to keep our house as safe as possible for me. It was incredibly frustrating to know that an exposure to a vaccine preventable illness could end my life.

I am grateful to be past that point now, with a normally functioning immune system. I will never forget what it was like to have to rely on strangers' decisions to keep me safe and healthy.

The diseases we vaccinate for remain very real. My 9 year-old daughter, studied polio in third grade after reading an autobiography of a polio survivor. She came home last year with an exhaustively detailed report on polio, it's symptoms, it's treatment, and it's morbidity, and mortality rates. While regaling me on the topic for the approximately eighty-third time, she paused and then asked me if

I had chosen to vaccinate her for polio. I assured her I had. A master of dry wit and sarcasm, she replied very sincerely, "Thank you!! Polio does NOT sound like a good time, Momma." She was correct in that assessment.

As a pediatric nurse, I have cared for infants in respiratory failure caused by pertussis. They contracted whooping cough or pertussis often when they were too young to be vaccinated. I have spent 12 hour shifts at baby's bedsides, in full isolation attire, working to ease their breathing. I have seen the havoc bacterial meningitis can wreak on a healthy developing brain and the permanent resulting impairments that last a life time.

Vaccines have been exhaustively researched and proven to be safe. Research repeatedly fails to show any evidence-based connection to Autism Spectrum Disorders. However there remains rampant misinformation and confusion on the issue. Concern over somehow triggering Autism is often given as an argument to not vaccinate.

I am not a researcher nor a physician, but I am a mother to an Autistic child. From the day my son Emerson was born, I knew that his brain

was not wired like a neurotypical child's. He needed more from us, more help soothing, more help eating, and more help functioning. Emerson will likely need that help throughout his lifetime at different levels. Emerson's brain processes that make him Autistic are no more caused by an exposure to vaccines than his beautiful green eyes, his height, or his sweet affectionate heart are. His diagnosis is not, nor has it ever been the "tragedy" for either him or our family that Mr. Robert Kennedy Jr and other anti-vaccine advocates have espoused.

I firmly and emphatically reject the notion that Emerson's diagnosis of Autism was caused by anything other than genetics and hardwiring in utero. Along with that rejection, I add that his life as an Autistic person does not have less value, less worth, nor does he have fewer contributions to make to our society than someone with a so-called "normal brain". I would choose Emerson, just as he is, every day of my life. Autism must not and should not be used as an excuse to avoid protecting the vulnerable in our populations.

Nearly 3 years ago, I had to sit my children down and tell them that I had cancer. They were 5 and 7 at that time. My daughter first asked, "Are you going to die?" I wanted to answer her as honestly as

possible and I remember blurting “Well, I am going to try really hard not to.” She nodded and said, “Well, who is going to take care of us? “ As I opened my mouth to respond, she waved her hands to quiet me and said, “Ooooooh, I KNOW! We have a whole community to help us!! Like when you take people food and knit them things and all that. Right?” I nodded, too choked up to speak. Then she asked, “Can I turn Transformers back on and eat a brownie?”

She wasn’t wrong though: our community came through for us in a thousand different tiny and huge ways. I had to make a choice to trust that community to keep me safe and cared for and immunizing for vaccine preventable illnesses was an important part of that.

When we talk about herd immunity, I always picture the way an elephant herd protects their weak and young: they place them in the center and stand around them, facing out, ready to do what must be done to protect the smallest and the sickest. I ask you, our Legislature, to repeal the philosophical vaccine exemption and do the same.

Thank you.