

For the past 15 years, I have been honored to provide early care and education for young children. I've been a witness to the magic of a child developing and parents growing their families. So, when it came time to have a family of our own I thought I would know what to expect. I had seen all the hardships and struggles. I knew the challenges that lay ahead to find child care. I knew that the United States is ranked at the bottom of developed nations when it comes to providing paid family medical leave. I have a Bachelors in Family Science and a Masters in Early Childhood. Certainly knowing all this, I would be able to navigate the first year of our child's life with ease.

We put off starting our family for a long time. We, like so many, had student loans. We wanted to buy a house and made the financially safe decision and settled for a duplex. When we finally got pregnant we met with a medical insurance representative to get a clear picture of what child birth would cost. Despite all of the preparation we were uncertain how we would be able to afford not receiving full paychecks for an extended amount of time. After all, most early childhood educators aren't making a living wage, let alone living off sixty percent of that wage.

Our daughter was born on December 5th of 2015. She was 43 weeks when she was delivered. I had been working up until I went into labor. One of the many challenges with not having paid family leave is it means every day at work matters. Can you imagine if I would have started using my vacation time at 38 weeks? I could have been waiting around for 5 weeks for our daughter to come leaving me with zero vacation days. Oh how I wished I could have taken a day to relax and enter into this amazing role feeling at my best instead of exhausted.

My daughter arrived healthy and we had the usual challenges adjusting to life as parents. Luckily, she was born and tax season arrived. We got our taxes done so fast that year. Our return helped get us through my 12 weeks of leave. I received 6 weeks pay at sixty percent and 6 weeks unpaid and I was able keep my job. Every penny mattered during that time.

My husband used his vacation time he accrued working at UVM to stay at home with our daughter after I went back to work. When he returned to work, we still didn't have child care. We had put our names on almost ten different provider waitlists upon learning of our pregnancy. No one had an opening. After talking with my boss, she agreed to give me the summer off and return at the start of the school year in the fall. Shortly after, I got a call from Ellen Drolette. She had a spot in her home care in Burlington. Unfortunately, because I committed to taking a leave of absence, my teaching spot was already filled for the summer. In order to hold my child care spot I would have to pay almost three months of tuition, roughly three thousand dollars. We used the rest of our tax return and accepted help from our parents. We were lucky that it all worked out for our family.

In preparation for sharing our families story tonight, I reached out to friends and asked them to share their stories with me. Each one of them shared the same struggles. Despite being educated and skilled at navigating systems and planning ahead, they all shared that the financial burden was stressful. They wished they had more time to bond as a family. They wish

they didn't have to go back to work only to be forced into pumping in closets, cars, or laundry rooms just to get 2 oz of breastmilk. Each one of these woman, regardless of the challenges, said they were the lucky ones. In the end, maybe it isn't that we're lucky. We're resilient. We make the best of challenging situations because we have to. Because that's what the system forces us to do.

This piece of legislation is more than just about being there in the beginning and the end of life for loved ones. It's about creating a system that demonstrates that it cares about the wellbeing of each community member. In 2015 before my daughter was born, I had the privilege to be a part of the first Early Childhood Leadership Institute through the Snelling Center. One of our discussions surrounded identifying our values. Our presenter prompted us to discern on our own values. He stated, "If you want to know what you value, take a look at your wallet and your calendar." I want to thank you for including this event on your calendar tonight. I value healthy families. I value my community. And I want Vermont to share these values not only in theory but in the way it governs. This bill, however small a step, is imperative to creating a Vermont that is competitive and thriving. I strongly urge you to support this legislation. Thank you!