

Testimony of Kevin Sisson for Kansas Bill SB5

I would like to review three points with you today:

Our family connection to Kansas

A little about Justin, who he was

Why this Memorial is Important

Family Connection

Both our families go back generations in Kansas. Mine to Great, Great Grandparents and Phyllis to Grandparents. Both our parents chose to make Kansas their home and raise their families in the Kansas City area. Phyllis spent the first 23 years of her life growing up in Kansas. My father was military, moving us around regularly, but he settled his family in Kansas in 1973 and lived there until his passing in 1992. Currently, Phyllis mother and brother live in Kansas as does my brother and his family.

Justin was born in Minnesota, but we moved back to Kansas shortly after he was born. Before leaving home for college at Florida State, Justin lived in Kansas for 13 of his first 18 years, including the last 7 years graduating from Harmony elementary school, Pleasant Ridge Middle School and Blue Valley West High School. Overland Park was our family's home, it was Justin's home. Given his service, Justin could have been buried anywhere, including places like Arlington National Cemetery, but that would not have been for Justin. He is home, buried in Leavenworth National Cemetery with his two grandfathers.

About Justin:

Justin was on an ROTC scholarship to Florida State University. In his freshman year, he decided that he would not get the training he felt he needed just being a cadet, he would have greater access to training and courses if he joined the National Guard as well. He joined in his second semester. Within in 6 months, he found that his unit was to be deployed to Iraq in support of continued operations there. As a college student, Justin was exempt from being required to go with the unit, he did not have to go. He chose to interrupt his college career and put himself in harm's way, deploying in 2009. Returning home a year later, he was the only enlisted man to be decorated by the Unit's leadership, earning a Bronze Star for his great work. One of his Sergeants and friends

told us that Justin was the kind of man you loved and feared. You loved having him on your team, because he made your job easier and your team better. You feared him because you knew he was better than you and could take your job in a heartbeat.

He came back to FSU and resumed his career as a ROTC cadet. He rose quickly through the ranks and was named to head the cadet core after his junior year. Another of his friends from FSU told us the story of his meeting Justin and how it changes his life. He was a lost freshman student, struggling to find his place at a big university. He was wandering the ROTC building, just taking a look, when he stumbled into the room where Justin and his leadership had their offices. Justin brought him in and talked to him for quite a while. This young man joined ROTC after meeting with Justin, telling us that Justin continued to mentor him, helping him find his place at FSU. This young man thrived at FSU ROTC, finished his education and commissioned as a 2LT, and is serving our country today. He does not know where he would be today had he not met Justin on that day.

Justin told us Ranger school was the toughest test he had ever endured. This from a young man who had seen war, attended numerous classes and courses in the military. The mental and emotional fatigue of 3 months of intense physical training were brutal, leading more than half of all class participants to wash out of the program before graduating. One particular segment, Justin was not assigned to lead the Platoon, rather to be a member of the platoon while others led. The group was in the middle of a brutal assignment and the entire platoon was completely exhausted and on a short break before resuming their trek towards the given objective. When they were attempting to get going again, one member of the platoon could not physically get up and resume. The leadership was trying to figure out how to get moving, was confused as to what to do with a team member who was done. As the story was told to us by one of the soldiers there, every one of the men were totally spent. He said Justin got up, walked over to the soldier who could not continue, hoisted him up over his shoulder and set off towards the objective with this man, and his roughly 100lb pack on his back. As you might imagine, this got the entire group moving and they were able to achieve the objective. All these men who would soon lead men into battle learned something about leadership that day.

Lastly, when Justin arrived in Afghanistan to take over his platoon, his platoon sergeant was rightfully skeptical. Here comes another fresh faced 2LT, who thinks he knows more than me, I have to start over with him. As an Army veteran and having been through multiple deployments, he had seen many officers come and go. While he had not seen many with the experience Justin brought, he was determined to set his new

commander straight. At their first meeting, Sgt. Allen told Justin that the men were his and would not follow Justin, would only follow him. Justin's response would stay with him forever: "I believe you and hope you can help me with that". Needless to say, they became quite close in the short time they were together.

I tell you these stories to try and convey what Justin did to help and inspire people while he lived. Which leads to the question this committee asked us to answer: What would this memorial highway do for the people of Kansas?

For those who knew him, we hope it will remind them of the kind of person he was, what things he stood for, and maybe inspire them to be the best they can be. Perhaps be a visual reminder that Justin wanted the best for them, proudly gave his life for them, and is always there for them.

For those who did not know him, maybe it will inspire them to look up his story, learn about him and what he stood for, and motivate them in some way. Minimally, they will know that there are still people in this world who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice so they can live free. They will also know that Kansas respects and honors its hero's.

For his family, our biggest fear is that somehow Justin will be forgotten. We have been so fortunate to have such good friends who have helped us ensure Justin's memory will live on. For us, this is one more reminder to all of a life lived to its fullest, one that will not fade away.

As I close, I just want you to know that we are grateful to you for your consideration. I would ask that this committee not stop with this bill. Thousands have died to protect this country, many from Kansas, I believe they all deserve to be remembered. They did not give their lives lightly, they should not be forgotten. Their families and friends deserve recognition like these signs to serve as a reminder of their sacrifice and our gratitude to them for their service.

Kevin and Phyllis Sisson