

Congressional Testimony

Before the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communication and Technology

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Marked By COVID

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communication and Technology of the United States Congress on the topic of disinformation in the media. My name is Kristin Urquiza. I am the co-founder of a grassroots non-profit called Marked By COVID. My partner Christine Keeves and I founded it the day we buried my father, Mark Anthony Urquiza, who died from COVID-19 on June 30, 2020; he was 65.

Last summer, I shared an abbreviated version of my story at the Democratic National Convention. I spoke about two themes in my brief remarks: the two Americas that exist (one for the elite and one for everyone else) and that "my father's only pre-existing condition was trusting Donald Trump and for that, he paid with his life." During this 5-minute testimony, I will expand upon these themes. But I must also share with you that while my father's story is tragic, it is not unique. What you might not know about me that every single day since my father has passed, I have spoken to people who have lost close family members and loved ones to COVID, and I am haunted by the eerie similarities between so many of us.

Let me start by stating something obvious: the primary person and entity responsible for my father's death and hundreds of thousands of people is Donald Trump. Until the day I take my last breath, I will fight for this truth to be recognized and recorded in the history books so that we know the unvarnished truth of what happened and why. My family has hearty genes: we tend to live into our 90s, so I'm in this for the long game. A growing body of evidence already substantiates this fact: on October 22, 2020, Cornell University released a study finding the 'Single Largest Driver' of Coronavirus Misinformation: Trump. On September 9, 2020, with the release of audiotapes from interviews with Bob Woodward, we heard the President confess he clearly understood the imminent threat and danger of them as early as February and decided to downplay the virus not to create a panic. Marked By COVID is advocating for a Commission to investigate the Federal Government response to the pandemic thoroughly, so we know exactly what happened and why.

However, crime and malfeasance aren't always committed by a single actor. Frequently there are accomplices, enablers, and complicit parties. To the people in this room and this sacred body who blindly followed the former President without questioning, who put party over country, you and your colleagues are enablers. The media and, in particular, cable news, the topic of

today, was complicit. Cable news may not have pulled the gun's trigger pointed at my father's head, but it indeed drove the getaway car.

Let me start by giving you a bit more background on just who my beloved Dad. Besides being a high school state track star, which I wrote about in my Dad's #HonestObituary, he was in the Reserve Officer Training Corps, better known as ROTC. He was eager to join the military—I recently found his saved draft card from the Vietnam War— but his dreams were cut short by a hunting accident. At age 18, he was shot in the head. His three brothers, my uncles, would all serve instead. He was unable to serve did not damper nor wane his love for this country nor interest in the military. He would work in manufacturing in the aerospace industry, where his employers worked on many government contracts for military machinery. He would spend ample time instilling in me values of patriotism, country first, and the military's role in keeping our freedom.

He instilled in me this: during times of crisis, it is our duty to our country to turn to our leaders for information on what to do and keep one another and our Democracy safe. My Dad reinforced this message through our weekly viewings of war stories on the History Channel. I have so many memories of watching the History Channel that they all bleed together. It was part of what we did together. His love for this country, just like the twinkle in his eye and his mischievous smile, was infectious and central to our bond. One lesson—besides the United States has the most powerful military in the world—that was taught repeatedly in those documentaries was this: in times of crisis, you turn to the people in charge. You follow orders. You do this for the good of the country.

So on May 5, 2020, when the former President made his first public appearance from his quarantine at the White House to the Honeywell facility in Phoenix, Arizona—the same facility where my father worked for many years, where I can remember joining him for a "take your daughter to work day"—and said, it was time to open up, my Dad listened. When Arizona Governor Doug Ducey flipped the switch on May 15, reopening the state with absolutely no safety measures in place and forbidding local governments from taking additional action, the evidence was mounting that we had overcome the enemy of the virus. As May progressed, the messages I started to hear from my Dad were: "It's safe. We're on the other side."

Let me be abundantly clear: my father was not a personal friend of President Donald Trump nor Governor Doug Ducey. He never met the former President. He did not know anyone close to the former President. Like everyone else I know, my Dad received his information through an intermediary. His media of choice since the early 2000s was Fox Cable News when he was at home and Arizona's KTAR News 92.3 radio station when he was driving around the Valley.

My Dad was always a voracious consumer of television, radio, and print media. He instilled in me the need to keep updated with news. The second to last picture on his phone was a picture of the television in his hospital room turned onto the news to capture an image of President Trump and Doug Ducey at an unmasked campaign rally they held in Arizona at the time when Arizona had the worst cases per capita in the world. Even as he fought to breathe, he was keeping up with what was going on.

My parents never questioned the reality of the pandemic nor the efficacy of wearing masks. During the quarantine, my Dad sheltered in place, only leaving to go to work until his job furloughed employees in late April. Afterward, he was at home, watching cable news and looking for employment. We spoke regularly as the pandemic started to spread across the country and as new information on safety measures came into focus. We were both concerned for my mom's safety, who is diabetic, and the potential severity an infection could have on her. Unlike other millennial friends struggling to reason with boomer-generation parents, I felt relieved that we were in communication with one another and on the same page.

That all started to change after the President's visit to Arizona. My Dad, a huge supporter of President Trump, began to push back on me when I would caution him about the states reopening strategy and whether it was safe. I can remember my Dad saying to me, "Kristin, why would they say it's safe to reopen if it's not safe. Why would the Governor or the President say that if it is not safe?" You don't have to dig very deep into the annals of the internet to find both President Trump and Doug Ducey pushing out the message that we have nothing to fear; we've got to get back to business. As late as May 28—around the exact time we suspect my Dad contracted the virus—Governor Doug Ducey joined my Dad's favorite radio show, KTAR, for a Q&A on the coronavirus. He said, "We're safe out there. We've been responsible ... I want to encourage people to get out and about, to take a loved one to dinner, to go retail shopping," Ducey said, "If you don't have an underlying health condition, it's safe out there."

Just two months prior, my Dad had received a clean bill of health from his doctor. Many of our relatives, including his Dad and Aunt, lived well into their 90s. While my Dad was 65, he did not consider himself "old nor unhealthy" by any stretch of the imagination, and through the month of May, the people in charge, the people he trusted and voted for told him over and over again that he didn't have to worry. He did what he needed to do for his country, and now he needed to get back out into the world he loved so much and help jump-start the economy.

As May progressed, I started to hear more and more of the disinformation about the virus, about the risk, about safety measures coming from my Dad. I did my best to fight back, but there is no way that one person can compete with the microphone of the office of the President nor the propaganda machine that has become Fox Cable News.

On June 11, 2020, my Dad woke up with a fever, cough, and exhaustion. Similar symptoms to the news reported that the President had several months later when he contracted the virus. When my father went to the doctor on June 12 for a COVID test, he was not admitted into the hospital under an "abundance of caution," the treatment that elite political COVID deniers like President Trump, Governor Chris Christie, and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani received. No, the doctor told him to go home and report to the hospital if he started to experience trouble breathing. Five days later, he woke up unable to breathe, and my mother rushed him to the emergency room where he would battle the virus for 14 days before succumbing to it. My Dad took a bullet to the head and lived to tell the tale, but he couldn't survive this pernicious, dangerous, and deadly viral infection. The day before his condition worsened and he was admitted to the ICU, he texted me to say, "I feel so much better; I think I'll be home on Monday." Instead, he died on Tuesday. He died alone. I took the phone call from a gas station on the highway, where I tried to get home to be closer to my mother and father from California. I didn't get to say goodbye. He did not get the dignity we all deserve in the process of transitioning.

This should not have happened: it did not have to be this way. In the days following the passing of my father, my partner and I decided to launch Marked By COVID, the organization that we now co-lead where we uplift stories of loss and support civic engagement from one of the largest growing stakeholder groups in the country: people who have lost a close loved one to COVID. Many of these people have entrusted in us their stories, and so many of their stories echo mine. The President lied repeatedly. That disinformation was allowed to litter the airways

and created the exact right conditions for the virus to thrive and for hundreds of thousands of people to pass away needlessly.

I said it earlier, and I'll repeat it. The media didn't pull the trigger, but they drove the getaway car. Cable news channels like Fox News are complicit. However, other news institutions are at fault, too; it wasn't until after the Woodward quotes debuted that the media started to list the President's falsehoods as lies. Free speech scholars argue that for a democracy to function, informed debates and the marketplace of ideas must work off a shared set of facts.

Mark Anthony "Black Jack" Urquiza. Isabelle "Obie" Papadimitriou. Charles Krebbs. Genevieve Martinez. Dr. Gaye Griffin-Snyder. Mike Horton. Kathy Jones. Calvin Schoenfeld. William Curby. Manuel Urquiza. And more than half a million other names. Every single one of them deserves to be said out loud in this hearing. Every single one of them was irreplaceable yet treated as expendable by their own country. Betrayed by the people entrusted to serve and protect them.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story and holding this hearing to address the role of media fanning the flames of disinformation.