

1 CHAIRMAN JAMES: Miss Donna Kelly?

2 MS. KELLY: I would like to first thank everyone  
3 involved in this process, especially my husband who is sitting in  
4 this room, and this is probably as hard for him as it is for me.

5 The commission may never realize just how important  
6 this is to me and all other compulsive gamblers. My name is  
7 Donna Kelly; I am a compulsive gambler. I am a 34-year old  
8 mother of two, married seven years to a police officer.

9 I do not have the knowledge that the speakers before  
10 me have, but as requested by a commission member, I do have the  
11 facts and I hope that you can learn something from what I have to  
12 say.

13 The events that have taken place in my life since the  
14 advent of legalized gambling in Louisiana are hard to believe.  
15 In fact, they sound like they were taken right out of a movie, a  
16 horror movie. I don't know the exact date I realized I was  
17 addicted to gambling but I'll never forget the day it almost cost  
18 me my life.

19 It was Tuesday, November 25, 1997, just two days  
20 before Thanksgiving. For several months I had been trying on my  
21 own, unsuccessfully, to stop gambling. The web of lies I had  
22 spun to hide my habit from those closest to me, especially my  
23 husband, had ensnared me completely.

24 I had my own post office box so that bills wouldn't  
25 come to my house and betray me. But just in case they did, I had  
26 my oldest child screen the mail and hide it from her daddy so it  
27 wouldn't -- so he wouldn't be mad, he wouldn't know.

28 I even bribed my kids and made them co-conspirators  
29 in my lives by frequently taking them with me while my husband

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1 was working so that they could play games, eat pizza while I sat  
2 at a video poker machine, as I reminded them that it was a secret  
3 from your daddy and he wasn't to know.

4 As I became more desperate and tried to gamble my way  
5 out of debt so I could quit once and for all, I only succeeded in  
6 digging a deeper hole. Every time I gambled, the amount I lost  
7 would grow. I believe the amount I have lost since becoming  
8 addicted is in the neighborhood of \$100,000.

9 You may wonder where someone like me, a secretary,  
10 would get that kind of money. Well, first you go through  
11 whatever money you have on hand. Then you max out as many credit  
12 cards as you can. Then you take out loans, usually at outrageous  
13 interest rates, just to make the minimum payments on the maxed  
14 out cards.

15 You borrow money from other family members as well,  
16 concocting elaborate complicated lies to explain the need, never  
17 admitting that you're gambling. When you play out all those  
18 options, you start stealing, first from the people who love you  
19 the most -- your spouse and even your children, including  
20 literally the coins from your 7-year old's piggy bank.

21 But it still isn't enough. Within a few hours, I  
22 would lose hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars, playing  
23 video poker in riverboat casinos.

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1 began to catch up with me. On November 25, 1997, I was at work  
2 when I received a phone call that would change my life forever.

3 The owner of a video poker outlet where I was a  
4 regular told me that he had filed charges against me with the  
5 local sheriff's office for writing checks, hot checks -- excuse  
6 me. These checks, where his employees -- or his employees had  
7 cashed over and over so that I could keep playing.

8 This wasn't the first time that my checks had been  
9 returned but it was the first time that I could not cover them.  
10 My options had finally run out. As I mentioned earlier, my  
11 husband is a police officer and normally works 60 to 70 hours per  
12 week to provide for our family. He had no idea the extent of my  
13 illness or of our debt and that his wife was about to be  
14 arrested.

15 The walls were caving in on me rapidly and the  
16 pressure became unbearable. I left work a short time later to go  
17 to a scheduled appointment with my psychiatrist. Considering the  
18 circumstances, it was the best place I could have gone but I  
19 never made it.

20 Instead, I stopped at a bar and started drinking and  
21 playing video poker. I drank and drank for hours and then  
22 started taking 20 milligrams pills of Prozac, hoping the  
23 combination of the two would end my pain forever.

24 As this was going on, my husband came home from work  
25 and had no idea where I was or what was happening. Somehow I  
26 didn't pass out and finally left the bar, driving about one mile  
27 to a local hotel, and by the grace of God, I didn't kill anyone  
28 or myself on the way.

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1 My sister, whom my panicked husband had called to  
2 help look for me, happened to spot my car as I was checking in.  
3 She tried to persuade me to leave with her but I wouldn't. I  
4 called home within a few minutes, drunk and incoherent, and my  
5 husband, still not fully understanding what was happening,  
6 finally convinced me to let my sister take me home.

7 When I woke the next morning, I staggered into the  
8 kitchen. My husband was sitting there. He had been up most of  
9 the night, and by the look on his face, I knew things had  
10 changed. He essentially told me that if I didn't check myself in  
11 to the hospital our marriage was over.

12 That same day I voluntarily entered a local mental  
13 center to be treated for a gambling addiction. I later found out  
14 that my husband was prepared to have me committed if I hadn't  
15 done it. Upon entering and being locked in, I was put on suicide  
16 watch -- no shoelaces, no sharp objects, constant supervision.

17 The embarrassment and the humiliation I felt was  
18 indescribable. As I looked around the room, I saw disturbed  
19 people who had all manner of disorders -- drug addicts,  
20 alcoholics, sexual deviants, mental illness.

21 Surely there had been a mistake made. I wasn't crazy  
22 and I wasn't staying, but I was wrong. The doors were locked and  
23 I was as sick as my fellow patients.

24 My husband came to visit me every evening and we had  
25 our Thanksgiving dinner -- Thanksgiving turkey alone in the  
26 hospital cafeteria. He then brought our children to visit after  
27 several days, and all they knew is that Mommy was very sick.

28 But after a week, I felt I was slowly beginning to  
29 regain my sanity. I was released and continued to go into

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1 intensive outpatient therapy sessions four nights a week. I also  
2 began attending Gamblers Anonymous meetings and found I was not  
3 alone in my addiction.

4 My husband was still with me, my children still loved  
5 me. Things were looking up for the first time in a long time.  
6 Then on February -- then on December 19, less than one week  
7 before Christmas, I reached a new bottom.

8 I was arrested and booked into the local Paris  
9 Prison, charged with 24 counts of felony theft, also, as a result  
10 of actions taken while I was in the throes of my addiction of  
11 gambling.

12 I was certain my life was over. My husband and my  
13 children would be lost to me forever. I thought everyone has to  
14 have a limit, how much they can take and this was mine.

15 As I stood locked in a jail cell, surrounded by  
16 criminals and being treated no differently than they, I realized  
17 I had reached the end of my rope. Given the means, I had no  
18 doubt I would kill myself then and there.

19 But within a few hours, my husband, the police  
20 officer, arrived and bailed me out. He had to sign a property  
21 bond, using our family home, to have me released. I knew now  
22 this was almost as painful for him as it was for me.

23 Ironically, this all occurred on the night of my  
24 office Christmas party, an event that I helped plan and was  
25 looking forward to very much. On the way home from Paris Prison,  
26 I began to cry. My husband suggested that we stop by the party,  
27 thinking it might cheer me up to be around friends and co-  
28 workers, and I agreed. So we went on.

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1           We were about two hours late and, of course, no one  
2 had any idea what had happened to me. And when my boss opened  
3 the door, he jokingly said, you look like hell. But hell doesn't  
4 begin to describe where I had been or how I was feeling at that  
5 point.

6           I never told anyone that night why I was late. As a  
7 matter of fact, I kept it a secret until I realized the criminal  
8 charges were not going away. In March, I finally left that job,  
9 a job that I held for two and a half years, being personal  
10 secretary to one of the area's most influential businessmen.

11           It was several weeks before I told him why I had  
12 quit. The reasons were he receives millions of dollars in public  
13 contracts each year and I didn't want to take the chance of  
14 having him receive bad publicity or losing jobs for employing an  
15 accused criminal, me, as the secretary.

16           I was very lucky in that someone else was willing to  
17 take a chance on me. I started at a new job and had been there  
18 for nearly six months, but I have continued to remain active in  
19 Gamblers Anonymous, and except for a brief relapse last spring  
20 and a few Powerball tickets, I am here with God's help remaining  
21 off the bet.

22           My marriage is still intact and my children are well  
23 cared for. In sum, I know it could have been much worse, like  
24 the woman who allowed her child to suffocate in her car while she  
25 was playing video poker or the man who was accused of committing  
26 several robberies and murders to support his gambling habit or  
27 the countless others who have lost their families, their careers,  
28 their freedom and even their lives because of their addiction to  
29 gambling.

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1 I realize the majority of people who gamble can do so  
2 on a recreational basis without ever becoming addicted, but I  
3 cannot and neither can thousands of others, many of whom still  
4 have not reached the rock bottom.

5 The truth that legalization and regulation of crack  
6 cocaine, heroine and prostitution would also fill our government  
7 coffers, yet we, as a society, have decided that some things are  
8 more important than money, things like morality, decency, self-  
9 respect and family values.

10 And the ugly reality is that the lure of gambling,  
11 the high of chasing a win, and the pursuit of seemingly easy  
12 money come at an awful cost.

13 CHAIRMAN JAMES: Donna, I'm going to thank you at  
14 that point for your testimony and thank you for putting a human  
15 face on the research and the data and the statistics that have  
16 been brought before this commission today.

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