CHAIRMAN JAMES: Robin?

ROBIN: First, let me say I'm glad to be here because a good friend, Dr. Rick Beden, asked me to do this. Unfortunately, he passed away about two and a half weeks ago. So I hope that in some way my testimony will honor his memory. He was a wonderful physician on the Gulf Coast and a wonderful man as well.

Long before your commission was established or had its first meeting, my family and I were experiencing the effects of living with a compulsive gambler. Since the beginning of 1995, I had answered yes to all 20 of the quote, are you living with a compulsive gambler questions.

My compulsive gambler is my husband, a former attorney on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Unfortunately, not only is he plagued with his gambling addictions, but it is compounded by his addiction to alcohol. The final results of these two addictions have been a break-up of our family unit, relationships damaged between a father and three lovely daughters, financial devastation and extreme emotional distress between all family members.

These destructive results and the story which I am about to relay to you are things that have happened to either myself or my family members as a direct result from my husband's gambling. I feel certain, however, that there are many more relationships that have been severed, either personally or professionally, as a result of his addictions.

My husband and I were married in February 1969. He went to a treatment center for alcoholism in the summer of 1982, a very big miracle in my life, and then began to spend the next
12 years as a recovering alcoholic. He and I both went back to
college shortly after his release from the treatment center,
while at the same time managing three small daughters.

He obtained his law degree and I received a teacher's
certificate in the State of Mississippi. We began to rebuild our
lives together and for the next several years we had a life
filled with wonderful support from friends and family.

We attended a wonderful Episcopal church in Gulfport,
Mississippi where he became an extremely active member of the
congregation. He achieved the status of lay eucharistic
minister, and through this, was able to share his commitment to
God with others.

Because he had begun to practice law in 1986, by 1990
we were leading a fairly secure life financially. We were able
to provide a good home for not only ourselves but our three
daughters as well.

His relapse, to the best of my knowledge, occurred in
1994. By 1995, we knew that he was not only drinking heavily but
had begun gambling compulsively as well. All of his credit card
statements indicated that he had reached, if not exceeded, his
credit limits. Paying bills became increasingly difficult.

Looking back, I wish at this time I had sought help
through Gam-Anon. Al-Anon had been a wonderful organization and
really helpful to me before he went to treatment for alcoholism
in 1982 and then even after. I'm not sure actually, though, at
that particular time in '95 that we actually had a Gam-Anon
meeting on the coast. GA was certainly here at that time.

By the summer of 1996, he had really stopped
practicing law and seemed to be completely consumed by the
gambling. I went so far as to withdraw my teacher retirement fund, which had accumulated for about ten years, so that he could cover payments to some of the people that he had taken money from.

I would later find out that he had taken much larger sums of money than that teacher retirement fund, which was about a little over $12,000. To this day, almost none of these funds have ever been returned.

He was severely depressed and suicidal by the fall of 1996. The one joy in our life at this time was the birth of our first granddaughter in October, but by the end of November of that year, I did an involuntary commitment of my husband to the state hospital in Whitfield, Mississippi with the help of a dear doctor friend and a dear attorney friend. We felt that he would certainly harm himself if he did not take those steps to intervene.

Unfortunately, this treatment only focused on alcoholism. He was released at the end of January 1997 and within two weeks had begun gambling and drinking again. As hard as it is for many people, including myself, to believe, I continued to remain in this horrible situation until May 1998.

At that time, I sold my home, separated from my husband and was able to buy a smaller home for my youngest daughter and myself. My husband and I are in the process of getting a divorce at this time. This was never what I wanted. I wanted him to get into recovery and be well again.

Unfortunately, family members cannot make this happen. At this time, he is still gambling and still drinking.
He has not worked since the fall of 1996 and no longer holds a license to practice law in the State of Mississippi.

My girls and I are doing okay considering what we've been through but I know there will always be long-lasting effects. For example, one of my daughter has also had a gambling problem. Although she is currently recovering from this addiction, she has certainly suffered major devastating consequences.

She followed a path very similar to that of her father, the only difference being that the amount of financial damage was not nearly as great because she simply did not have the means. She stole money from her loved ones and an employer, resulting in an arrest and criminal charges brought against her by the DA's office.

Because she is a first-time offender, she will probably, or hopefully be accepted into a diversion program, and as long as she continues in recovery and makes restitution, she will be able to clear her own name.

Fortunately for her, she has, at this point in time, stopped heading down the path of destruction that her father chose. I only hope and pray that she has truly learned her lesson and the urge to gamble does not overcome her once again at a later time or place.

Fortunately for my daughters as well as myself, I did take some steps in order to give us financial protection. In the beginning of 1996, I had my husband deed our home to me. I set up separate bank accounts and began filing separate tax returns in 1995.
Now looking back, I am so thankful that I had the foresight to do these things because they afforded me the ability to own my own home today and I still have my teaching career.

I'm only one person with only one family. It saddens me to think of all the people and families who have been traumatized by similar experiences. People like my husband who have addictive personalities will have addiction problems. I have chosen not to live with his addiction any longer. It is just too painful.

If there is anything that I feel absolutely certain about, it is this: if there were no casinos and no legalized gambling, our family would not have been so severely financially devastated. I have been inside a casino four to six times in my life and I will choose not to go again.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony. I have a strong belief that in educating people we might be able to unlock some doors.

I will not argue the fact that the gaming industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast has strengthened our economy, but what it has also done is help to play a role in weakening and destroying personal lives, families and relationships. That is a sad thing and it's especially sad when that family belongs to you. Thank you.