

Sydney NSW, 20 September 2012

House of Representatives
Inquiry into Workplace Bullying
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Honourable MPs,

INTRODUCTION

My name is _____ and even though memories of my experience brings me to tears even as I type this, I would like to share it with the members of the House of Representatives and request that you please read this submission carefully in order to get some idea of the pain I have endured at the hands of bullies in a workplace which is supposed to be an institution of knowledge and wisdom to others, and promotes itself as a "centre of excellence" in the field of education.

I am writing this letter in hope that it will help to bring this serious problem to the spotlight, to create greater awareness, to simplify the processes to report this problem, obtaining justice and punishing those found guilty, and exercise greater efforts from the Government, private organisations and individuals to stop bullying in the workplace. I send this letter as my contribution to stop the abuse that supervisors and managers exercise over staff members; to stop the vicious circle of demoralization, complete disappearance of self esteem and attempt of suicide by highly productive members of our society. I send this letter as a normal, next-door kind of citizen that loves this country and wishes a better future than what we face at the moment.

I would have written this submission earlier but did not have the emotional strength to talk about my experience, let alone consider putting it in a public forum. However, I feel I need to speak out, as failure to do so would equate to my bullies getting away with it, and I would not be able to bear the thought of another individual being subjected to what I had to endure.

BACKGROUND

My experience with bullying, harassment and indirect discrimination occurred at the University of _____ concretely at the unit called Graduate Research School. The names of the perpetrators are _____ (Director), _____ (Manager) and by lack of action, _____ (Dean). I commenced working in this unit in August 2007 under a different managerial team, lead by Ms _____ who was an extraordinary manager and leader. During the first three years the situation was that of a normal workplace: learning my duties, making gradual progress in my position and developing knowledge and skills. I was highly regarded in my team at all levels and I was gladly committed to working hard and making a positive contribution to the workplace. I felt an integral and essential part of the team; I felt respected; I was motivated to give the best of myself; I thought I had found my path to a successful professional career. Our processes

and procedures were not perfect, but they worked; we made them work. There was an atmosphere of camaraderie and good will among the team members.

THE BEGINNING

However the situation changed drastically when Ms [redacted] took over the direction of the unit. Poor administrative decisions from her part saw our positions' descriptions and duties changing at least every ten months; incompletely developed systems were instituted; our operations began to suffer for her thirst to please the "big bosses". Change in organisations is normal, but we were not experiencing change; we experienced instability and lack of direction and leadership. This situation had a negative impact in Ms [redacted] health to the point of having to be hospitalized for one week in March 2010 (approximately) due to high levels of stress. Shortly after, the same negative effects became imminent in me. While I was not hospitalized, I was out of work for one week as well due to stress and anxiety in May 2010. In this same month, Ms [redacted] presented her resignation. I would later learn that she was "recommended to leave" by Ms [redacted] due to personal animosity.

It is at this point in time that the bullying started to point in my direction - in a very subtle way; disguised as an "opportunity" to gain further knowledge and experience. The truth was that I found myself in a position of performing the duties of two or more people. I was responsible for my own duties, as well as so called "temporary higher duties" (to cover for the absence of a manager after Ms [redacted] departure), training new staff members and the direct supervision of other members. The workload became excessive but there was no one to seek for help. I did not pay attention to it, but not only my physical, but also mental health, became highly unstable. In November 2010 the workload became too much to bear and I attempted suicide by ingesting a large number of sleeping tablets.

THINGS GET WORSE

In December 2010 an opportunity came available to remain permanently on a higher position; this position was essentially the same I had been performing for the last seven months - minus the excessive load as a result of a more stable administrative environment. I applied formally for this position knowing I was the most suitable candidate given the duties I performed the previous months; it was simply a matter of formalizing my position. Much to my surprise, I was not successful in obtaining the position. The reasons kept changing according to who I consulted between Mr [redacted] (who at this stage had become my supervisor) and Ms [redacted], and the timing of the enquiry. The answers went from "someone had a better interview than you", to "there are a number of issues to address", to "we will discuss it in your Annual Performance Review".

I kept working hard to earn the position I deserved, with the promise that my request would be reviewed at December 2011. My Annual Performance Review returned a positive result; there was no indication I was on a wrong path to ensure the higher position I was working towards. However the demands and workload kept increasing, as the support from the management decreased. In June 2011 under the pressure and the stress of the workload I was handling, I came close to take my life once again. My best friend came to my home to find me with a knife in the hand intending to slash

my wrists. After that event, I kept working hard, giving the best of myself waiting to the December 2011 review of my position.

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

In December 2011 the news were announced to me: I would not be promoted. I went into shock and extreme depression, I saw myself in need to take time off from work. When I returned to work in January 2012 the reasons I was given for this decision were subjective, insulting, demeaning, unjustified, unsupported, vicious and of a purely personal nature. I was told that I was a bully, a bad person, a person unpleasant to deal with. I was portrayed as a monster, as the worst person that had walked on this earth. I was given the supposed feedback that work colleagues had given of me to support this accusations. When I confronted these staff members, they denied it. Someone was insincere - it became an issue that involved not only the management, but now even my own work colleagues.

I was gradually ostracised from the team; while every person's birthday was celebrated, mine was completely ignored. I was removed from the position of OH&S representative without consultation. This is the point where _____, the Dean of the unit, finally acknowledged that there was a problem and we had a conversation together. The conversation returned no results despite my pleads for help and my clear demonstration of distress; she simply decided to stand aside and let Ms _____ and Mr _____ handle the issue. Eventually I was removed by Ms _____ and Mr _____ from the position I had successfully held for almost five years to a less relevant position that involved solely data entry and process work. The members of the Academy that I had so long worked with and who truly appreciated my work protested vehemently and expressed their disagreement with this decision and their support for me. Their protests fell in deaf ears and the transfer of position was carried on. The person who substituted me was of less seniority, held less experience and was actually, my subordinate when she joined the team, and one whom I trained to assist me in my duties!

The dealings with the management became unbearable. Their attitude towards me was condescending and patronising. In May 2012 the situation became so overwhelming for me that I presented my resignation. I had no choice, I could not continue one more day attending that office, tolerating the silent discrimination, working next to the people that destroyed me morally. I did not want to leave my job; I did not want to be unemployed; I did not want to quit. But my mental and physical wellbeing were on the line. I had to choose between dying slowly and surviving.

I also believe that there was a subtle strategy of discrimination prevalent within the Graduate Research School, _____. What, you may ask do I base this premise on? The fact that apart from myself (non-Caucasian), four other people "left" the workplace (I believe they were forced to leave, or left for the sake of preserving their sanity and well-being)- all four were non-Caucasian, and all were replaced by Caucasians. Coincidence? I believe not- you be the judge!

THE AFTERMATH

Today I am still unemployed. I search for jobs every day; I am finding it difficult to regain the self esteem and self confidence to demonstrate I am worthy of a good job, of a successful professional career. I attend counselling, seeing my psychologist once per week for severe depression and anxiety. I have not slept well in months, my concentration is poor, I have isolated myself from most of my friends and regular activities and I have been taking different antidepressants since February 2012. My motivation and self esteem seem to be ghosts of the past. I make progress sometimes; then I go back to being on suicidal mode - the last relapse being as early as last week. I am a well educated professional and a very hardworking person. I graduated with the highest GPA of my class from one of the most prestigious universities in Latin America. I then completed extensive hospitality studies in Australia where I graduated with the Dux Award and the third best GPA in my class in two different institutions. Bullying, harassment and discrimination were not issues I thought I would ever face - least of all in a country like Australia. But it happened; and it is wrong; and a solution must be found to stop it from occurring in our society.

I can only hope that my experience will serve to stop this cancer that has spread across our society almost unnoticed, almost ignored, almost accepted. I am more than happy to contribute and actively work towards workplaces free of this illness. I have lived through hell - and I would not wish anyone in this world to go through it.

If this Committee requires further information, I am more than happy to be contacted for further details regarding my experience of bullying, harassment and discrimination at the University in order to stop this behaviour and bring those perpetrators to justice.

Yours sincerely,