Bullying story resonates with many readers

Greg Dawson

Working

5:19 PM EST, November 6, 2012

Linda Dunavent spoke to me about being a victim of workplace bullying in hopes of encouraging others like her to break their silence and join her campaign for a legal remedy to behavior still outside the reach of the law.

The response to the story exceeded her hopes and opened her eyes.

"Oh, my goodness," she said. "I knew I was not alone. But who knew it was that bad?"

Dozens of readers commented online, the great majority supporting Dunavent and many offering their own stories of workplace bullying. Another dozen contacted me with emotionally wrenching testimony that I shared with Dunavent.

Among them is Susan Lublin, 57, a registered nurse in Orlando, who said she was bullied by another nurse – "I never imagined how horrible things could get" – and complained to administrators who gave her tormentor a second chance. Lublin asked to be transferred to another department and was told there were no openings.

"I had to stay working in my department or leave my job of 16 years," she said. "I am currently on leave for depression because of the toll that took. I would do whatever is needed to prevent people from experiencing what has drastically changed my life."

Dunavent will gladly enlist Lublin as a foot soldier in her push for Florida to adopt legislation that would make workplace bullying subject to the same penalties as harassment based on race, gender, age, disability and other categories.

The Workplace Bullying Institute in Washington state is chief advocate of the Healthy Workplace Bill, which is being considered in more than a dozen state legislatures. Dunavent was just named field director for the Florida effort. The immediate need is for a Florida legislator to sponsor the bill.

"We hope to be ready for the Legislature the first of next year," says Dunavent, who can be contacted at laura.dunavent@gmail.com.

She has an important ally – of sorts – in Sameer Hinduja, an associate professor of criminal justice at Florida Atlantic University who has published papers on workplace violence, which he
says encompasses not just physical violence but "anything that makes another worker uncomfortable."

Observing bullying in the workplace, classroom or playground, "We see the harm it inflicts, and we want something to be done – something with 'teeth' and repercussions and meaningful sanctions," Hinduja says.

But he is leery of legislation because, "I don't believe it would bear enough fruit. What tends to work better than laws from the top is creation of a workplace culture among all peers and co-workers that being a jerk to others is just unacceptable."

This is happening at a growing number of companies, says David Young, an employment and labor attorney at Fisher & Phillips in Orlando.

"More businesses are putting in place policies to establish civil and professional workplaces," he says. "They're saying, 'We don't want people coming in every day making everyone else's life miserable.' The worst-case scenario is when incivility spills over into workplace violence or claims of discrimination. There are a lot of risks for employers who see signs and choose not to do anything about it."

Even if a workplace bullying bill goes nowhere in the Legislature, as so often happens with first-time bills, Dunavent's campaign already has served a purpose by raising awareness of a problem that's been hiding in plain sight.

Workplace bullying is "alive and thriving in Orlando," wrote Alan Keck, a psychologist in Altamonte Springs. "I've treated a number of individuals victimized in this way, including several from the same workplace – an especially difficult dilemma in an economy where it's not easy to just quit and find another job."