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September 16, 2019

As a freshman at UWL Caycee Bean was sexually harassed by one of her professors. Eventually, she built up the courage to report her harasser, but UWL failed to adequately investigate her claim and timely communicate the outcome. On September 4, Bean shared her story by posting it on Facebook. In the days that followed, Bean received an outpouring of support from students and other members of the La Crosse Community, met with UWL Chancellor Joe Gow, spoke to other victims of harassment and sexual violence, and saw the investigation into her own harasser reopened. Bean is cooperating in the ongoing investigation being conducted by UWL and is hopeful that by sharing her experience she can help others and find closure for herself.

Bean started her freshman year at UWL with aspirations of becoming an artist and art teacher. In her second semester, a professor in the art department gave her an override to enter one of his advanced classes and offered her private drawing lessons. During what was supposed to be a drawing lesson, the professor cornered Bean in a locked paper closet, asked her to remove some of her clothing, commented on her body, and touched her.

Following this incident, Bean tried to continue in her classes but felt singled out by the professor. "He would come from behind and stand extremely close while I was working—closer than he would with other students in the class." Bean changed her major so that she could avoid her harasser, but increasingly struggled with depression and anxiety stemming from the harassment. In Spring 2018, Bean took an emergency leave of absence. She was unable to complete the semester and unable to compete in her final year of eligibility for track. As a result, she lost her opportunity to compete as a heptathlete in Outdoor Track Nationals.

In Fall 2018, Bean returned to UWL and to her art studies. She would see her harasser on campus speaking with young women and feel gut-churning fear. Her fear that others would be victimized by her harasser prompted her to report him to the university. Bean filed her report with UWL in March 2019.

When Bean returned to classes in Fall 2019, months had passed without communication from UWL about the status of her complaint. Bean contacted UWL and was told that Nizam Arain, Director of Equity & Affirmative Action, and John Acardo, UWL Director of

Human Resources had been responsible for the processing of her complaint. Shortly thereafter, she received an email response, which she included in her Facebook post. Bean arranged a meeting with Acardo to discuss the treatment of her complaint. Acardo told her the lack of communication with her had been an oversight. Bean left the meeting with the understanding that the investigation was complete and the matter closed. UWL took no substantive measures to protect other students from her harasser and took only token measures to protect her.

Even though her harasser was instructed not to have contact with her, he still worked in the building where she had classes and she still frequently saw him on campus. Frustrated and feeling that her complaint had been swept under a rug, Bean turned to Facebook. "When I hit 'post' it felt like a weight being lifted off of my shoulders," said Bean.

Bean did not anticipate the reaction her post would generate. "I'm thankful for the students and community members who shared or commented on my post. They helped my voice to be heard and encouraged others to come forward." Bean believes that had it not been for public interest in her story, her harasser would not be under investigation now.

Some students who have been harassed or assaulted reached out to Bean to share their own stories. Several reported having experiences similar to her own with her harasser. One or more people have independently come forward with formal complaints to UWL. Others are working with Bean to provide statements in the investigation. Some are not ready to come forward and Bean refuses to publicly identify or share their stories—saying, "they are not my stories to share. The people who lived them have to make that decision."

The investigation into Bean's harasser is ongoing. She hopes that her harasser is permanently removed from the UWL faculty. She fears that even if he is removed from the UWL faculty, he may get a position at another school where he can continue to prey on students. Bean encourages anyone who may have witnessed something or experienced harassment to come forward. In particular, Bean is seeking the person who rescued her that day in Spring 2015 by jiggling the paper closet door handle and standing by until she came out.

Some have asked Bean whether she has considered transferring schools. Bean is quick to point out that the La Crosse area is her home—it is the community she grew up in. "Why should I have to upend my life to feel safe again. What happened was not my fault." Sexual harassment is not a problem unique to UWL.

Beyond her own situation, Bean hopes that UWL reviews and makes changes to the way it processes complaints. It is easy to dismiss harassment as a comment misheard or an action misunderstood, but Bean says, "students deserve to be heard and believed." Bean says that she believed the university would advocate for her, but it did not. Asked what advice she has for incoming UWL students, Bean says, "trust your instincts even if the person you are dealing with is in a position of trust and authority. If it doesn't feel right, it

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probably is not right. You are not alone. Silence does not help anyone but the harasser. Coming forward is not easy, but it is worth it.”

Bean is now studying for her major in art and minor in photography and plans to graduate in Spring 2020. Reflecting on her experience, Bean says, “It was a struggle—it still is.”

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