

That was my Bobby

Bullying at work leads to death of great husband and father

by **Brenda Duhaime**

I met my Bobby at his sister Germaine's. Germaine and I had been friends for more than 10 years and I'd never laid eyes on her brother until the spring of 1979. All it took was one look and I was "twitter-pated" with him. Germaine said he was a bad ass and always in trouble and for some reason that made him even more appealing. What girl doesn't want a bad boy?

Bobby came from a family of 11: five sisters and five brothers. He was a twin born minutes before Albert. He always teased his twin saying it took a man to break trail. He loved to tease and make people laugh and he almost always drove his mama crazy. One time at a family function someone said to him you twins don't look alike; he responded by saying "same mom different dad". His mama came unglued and everyone laughed; that was how my Bobby rolled.

He was a kind and generous man who loved to help. He was a heavy equipment operator with his class 1A licence and always did whatever he had to do to bring home a pay cheque.

He was a great dad and in all the years I only ever saw him angry with the kids once – he scolded them once and it was over.

When the kids left home I got my safety tickets and went to work with him in northern Alberta, building the sites and access roads for oil lease properties. I became aware of how talented Bobby was on any piece of equipment from the track hoe to dozer and the grader. He made operating that equipment look like poetry. He was always being called on the radio to come fix what someone else messed up.

Being in the north with Bobby made me fall even more in love with his kind and gentle soul. He spent many of his lunch hours teaching some young person how to operate a piece of



Bobby and his twin brother Albert

equipment so they could better themselves. He taught me how to operate a dozer. I was worried about gouging the ground. His response was there isn't anything you can do to the dirt that you can't fix with dirt. That was my Bobby.

Over the years I suffered from painful shoulder and neck pain and in early January I found out I had a spinal cord injury. I had surgery about a week later and was put on permanent disability.

Bobby was getting more and more frustrated and stressed about being harassed daily.

Bobby wanted to be at home with me and when he saw an ad for a grader operator at a nearby municipality he applied and was hired. The shop and the office for this municipality was about 45 kms from our home so he could be home every evening.

Bobby worked for this municipality for two years without incident and was a favourite with some of the councillors as he knew what he was doing when it came to building and maintaining gravel roads.

One of the councillors was responsible for

the major gravel road leading to several large summer resorts. She wanted Bobby to maintain that gravel road because he knew what he was doing. Never once until the spring of 2017 did I see Bobby come from work stressed.

The fall of 2016 a new reeve was elected, and he wanted to get "his" roads maintained to his liking.

The trouble started Easter weekend of 2017. We were at our daughter's with our whole family and it was snowing hard. There was 30-40 cms of wet heavy snow on the ground and more coming. Bobby got a phone call from the counsellor wondering if Bobby could come and blade the snow off the road because people were having trouble getting through. Bobby couldn't say no so off he went. This road is approximately 20 kms long and towards the north end he pulled over with the grader as there were a lot of cars and trucks behind him wanting to get by. When he pulled over he slid into the ditch becoming stuck. He called the councillor and she came out to the road to assess the problem. She told Bobby to call an area farmer with a tractor. While the farmer was pulling him out, a tire came off the rim making it impossible to move the grader. That great Saskatchewan farmer also gave Bobby a lift back to the shop.

Well it seemed from that weekend to the end of June it rained three to four days a

week, making it almost impossible for the three grader operators to do their jobs. Bobby would get calls as early as 6:00 AM and as late as 10:00 about the condition of the gravel roads. Around the second week in May all the grader operators were put on probation because the reeve said they weren't doing their jobs. Bobby told the reeve and council that they didn't need grader operators; they needed a miracle because you can't grade mud. He was being constantly harassed about the condition of the roads.

The grader operators were called into a meeting and the other two operators were released from probation.

The councillor in charge of the resort road was very agitated. Under the new reeve's orders she was only allowed one grader once a week; prior to this reeve she got two graders twice a week. All this coupled with the wet conditions meant the resort road went to hell. She lived on the far end of the road and drove it daily. The municipal administrator also lived along this road so the two of them seemed to take this out on Bobby. It seemed Bobby was being held responsible for the weather conditions.

Bobby was getting more and more frustrated and stressed about being harassed daily. He asked the safety people at work for help but one of the safety people was the administrator who was also harassing him. The ones causing Bobby to be stressed were asked to stop but it never stopped so he asked occupational health and safety for help and that didn't happen. He asked worker's compensation for help and they said write us a story explaining what has gone on. Bobby and I spent eight hours writing out the details.

Around the end of June Bobby went on short term disability for anxiety, as advised by his doctor. I never found out until after Bobby's death that he was denied coverage by worker's compensation. In August he was asked to attend mediation. He was told all the people involved including the other grader operators would be attending, but when we arrived we were surprised to see that only the reeve was there. Bobby looked at me and said this is going to go sideways. The reeve said he was sick of watching "his" roads go to hell. It was decided that Bobby was going to go back to work the following Monday, August 28. I was to go to Saskatoon with our daughter and our grandson as he was in a hockey camp all week. Bobby said I should go. We left for Saskatoon on Sunday the 27th.

Bobby called me at coffee time on Monday the 28th and said everything was going ok.

On Tuesday Bobby told me a safety meeting

was called and the administrator arrived early and started attacking him about naming her in the occupational health and safety report he filed. He was shocked and left the building until others arrived. We chatted awhile and I encouraged him to tell the other safety officer at work about the verbal attack that morning.

Later that day the administrator called him and told him that he could run but couldn't hide as they had a GPS installed on his grader while he was on stress leave. This call distressed Bobby and in a phone call that evening I encouraged him to take more time off as the doctor had suggested.



Bobby and Brenda with two of their grandkids

The LAST call Bobby made was to the safety officer at work telling him that he wouldn't be at work the next day.

When I never got a call from Bobby by coffee time on the 30th of August I became concerned. I was enroute to the arena with our daughter and grandson and didn't want to cause them any stress so I kept the feeling to myself. After we arrived at the arena I called my sister who lived down the street from our house. When she got there she said all the doors were locked and the curtains drawn. She located our hidden key and found Bobby sleeping on the sofa but she couldn't wake him. I hung up and called 911 and then called her back. I told her to turn on Bobby's phone so I could hear what was going on.

A first responder arrived in minutes. He started working on Bobby and I could hear him yell stay with me Bob. Our daughter asked a mom at hockey camp to keep our grandson so we could go. The ambulance stopped about six times to revive Bobby. They decided to air lift him from North Battleford to the hospital in Saskatoon. By this time my daughter and I were only a few minutes out of North Battleford but we turned around and headed back to Saskatoon.

Bobby remained on the machines keeping

him alive until the scans of his brain showed that there was no brain activity and that there was no hope. I wanted to see if any of his organs could be donated. This process took hours and the verdict was that his organs were too damaged by the overdose of about 100 times a normal dose of his heart medication.

I really don't know how I got the necessary things done, nor do I remember doing some of them.

At the memorial service I had the urge to get up and tell the people a bit about what happened to my Bobby. I couldn't have one more person tell me that he was so selfish for what he did. When I finished I could see people crying and hear sobs. In 38 years living in and around our community was there ever more people than at my Bobby's service?

Several weeks after, I tried to get a lawyer to listen; I tried to get the media to listen. No one listened. I felt defeated.

I did not know that WCB was doing interviews with municipal council members and employees, former council members, former employees and the former reeve.

Later I received a call from WCB stating that the interviews proved Bobby had been bullied, harassed and put under unusual stress in the workplace. Guess what: now people listened. OH&S wanted an interview. CBC Radio did a story about what happened to Bob. When the story went nation-wide I received about 300 messages from people being bullied at work. A young woman from the NWT messaged that she had her death planned that day until she heard the word suicide on the radio and listened to Bobby's story. She said hearing the story made her decide not to die. She was being bullied at work and no one LISTENED.

The municipality appealed the WCB decision and lost all levels of appeal.

Life since has been a whirlwind. I really don't know how I made it this far. If tears could bring my Bobby back he would live forever and if talking about workplace bullying saves one life, Bobby would be good with that. People need to listen, really listen. If any one of the people Bobby asked for help really listened, they would have heard the distress he was going through. But he wasn't taken seriously. There needs to be training for council members. There needs to be a safe way for workers to report bullying.

Bobby was a great man, husband, father, brother, uncle and friend.

THAT WAS MY BOBBY.

For more information on bullying in the workplace, see the CCOHS factsheet, page 6.

What Is Workplace Bullying?

by **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, CCOHS.ca**

Bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could psychologically or 'mentally' hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Sometimes, bullying can involve negative physical contact as well. Bullying usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behaviour that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people. It has also been described as the assertion of power through aggression.

How can bullying affect an individual?

People who are the targets of bullying may experience a range of effects. These reactions include:

- Shock.
- Anger.
- Feelings of frustration and/or helplessness.
- Increased sense of vulnerability.
- Loss of confidence.
- Physical symptoms such as:
 - Inability to sleep.
 - Loss of appetite.
- Psychosomatic symptoms such as:
 - Stomach pains.
 - Headaches.
 - Panic or anxiety, especially about going to work.
 - Family tension and stress.
 - Inability to concentrate.
 - Low morale and productivity.

How can bullying affect the workplace?

Bullying affects the overall "health" of an organization. An "unhealthy" workplace can have many effects. In general, these effects include:

- Increased absenteeism.
- Increased turnover.
- Increased stress.
- Increased costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs), recruitment, etc.
- Increased risk for incidents.
- Decreased productivity and motivation.
- Decreased morale.
- Reduced corporate image and customer confidence.
- Poor customer service.

What can you do if you think you are being bullied?

If you feel that you are being bullied, discriminated against, victimized or subjected to any form of harassment:

DO:

- Firmly tell the person that his or her behaviour is not acceptable and ask them to stop. You can ask a person you trust, such as supervisor or union member to be with you when you approach the person.
- Keep a factual journal or diary of events. Record:
 - The date, time and what happened in as much detail as possible.
 - The names of witnesses.
 - The outcome of the event.

Remember, it is not just the character of the incidents, but intent of the behaviour and the number, frequency, and especially the pattern that can reveal the bullying or harassment.

- Keep copies of any letters, memos, e-mails, etc., received from the person.
- Report the bullying or harassment to the person identified in your workplace policy, your supervisor, or a delegated manager. If your concerns are minimized, proceed to the next level of management.

DO NOT:

- Do not retaliate. You may end up looking like the perpetrator and will most certainly cause confusion for those responsible for evaluating and responding to the situation.

Excerpted from: *Bullying in the Workplace*, <https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/bullying.html>, *OSH Answers*, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), December 22, 2020. Reproduced with the permission of CCOHS, 2021.