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**Laura Connors wins sexual harassment case against former boss**

**TEEN sexually harassed by her boss while working at eatery wins court battle against him.**

**By Sarah Michael**

LIKE thousands of young Australians, Laura Connors was excited to be in her first job, working part-time shifts at a local fast-food restaurant after school. But her enthusiasm was rewarded by a boss who took advantage of the “naïve 15-year-old girl” without the “life skills to deal with his conduct” to repeatedly harass her sexually.

These were the findings of the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal of Tasmania which after Ms Connors’ three-year legal battle ordered former Praties restaurant owner David Richardson pay her $12,000 compensation for his conduct.

Ms Connors, now 19 and working at a childcare centre, told news.com.au she had known Mr Richardson’s behaviour “wasn’t right” at the time but that she was too scared to say anything.

“I knew as soon as he came up to me that time and said: ‘Don’t tell anyone what I’ve done’,” she said. “I thought that was strange. “But he was my boss, I thought I had to respect him and I couldn’t say: ‘Hey, you can’t touch me’. I thought I couldn’t say anything.”

Instead, after months of harassment Ms Connors resigned in 2008 and attended lengthy counselling to deal with her diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety.

The tribunal heard that between 2007 and 2008 Mr Richardson had repeatedly pinched and squeezed Ms Connors’ bottom while moving past her in the Launceston restaurant’s small kitchen space. Ms Connors also gave evidence he had undone her apron strings and asked her to take her top off.

Mr Richardson strongly denied there was any sexual harassment but accepted he may have brushed past Ms Connors on occasion and touched her on the bottom accidentally because the kitchen was small.

The tribunal judgment found: “It seems that he enjoyed using the opportunities as they arose to touch [the girl].” The ruling continued: “The Tribunal is satisfied that Mr Richardson has sexually harassed Miss Connors as alleged. “The inappropriate physical acts involved the touching of her bottom whether it be brushing, touching, pinching or squeezing are conduct of a sexual nature.

“The Tribunal is also satisfied that Mr Richardson sexually harassed Miss Connors by asking her to take her top off as that is a comment with a sexual connotation particularly in the context of the touching.

“The Tribunal is also satisfied that Mr Richardson pulled Miss Connors apron strings causing the apron to fall off which was a completely inappropriate action which made Miss Connors feel extremely uncomfortable which had a sexual nature to it.”

The Praties outlet Mr Richardson owned in the suburb of Mowbray has since shut down.

Ms Connors said others suffering silently should not be afraid to come forward and do something if they were being harassed in the workplace.

“It was just seeing that the people in the court understood my pain and they believed me, it was so amazing they believed me,” she said.

“It’s not the money, not winning, it was that they knew he was wrong.”

She said she received the letter notifying her of the tribunal’s decision a few days after her nineteenth birthday. “I remember just sitting on my bed reading the letter and just crying,” Ms Connors said.

“I still find it really hard in the workplace, even with women, I’m still very self-conscious of what I’m doing and what people are thinking about me.”

She said taking the matter to the tribunal was a long and emotionally draining process, and the legal fees amounted to almost double her $12,000 payout.

**The outcome of the case was that Mr. Richardson was ordered to pay Ms Connors $12,000 in compensation.**