Clifford W. Beers Award Nomination

Lisa Eley once had thoughts of killing her supervisor, thoughts that required her to have an emergency hospitalization. Consequently, she was admitted to an asylum. Lisa was eventually diagnosed with major depressive disorder, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and PTSD--mental disorders that had accumulated over time from an extremely hostile work environment. Lisa’s mental health collapsed as a result of her manager’s unabated bullying behavior towards her, which proved to be nearly fatal.

With no prior history of mental illness, Lisa was placed under suicide watch in a mental hospital. When the suicidal crisis relaxed enough for her to be discharged, Lisa continued her treatment in an outpatient behavioral health facility for nearly a year.

While initially leery about being admitted to a psychiatric facility, Lisa now admits that getting help for her mental illness was one of the best decisions of her life. She credits caring and dedicated mental health professionals with saving her life. From the beginning of her emergency room visit until her last day in psychotherapy, staff told her that she did the right thing by seeking treatment.

The most challenging part of her mental illness development was the lack of support from her federal agency; they failed to address the bullying. Her mental illness could have been prevented had they taken her bullying allegations seriously. Even after she’d been admitted for treatment, her employer continued to deny any wrongdoing by her manager, citing there was no evidence to support that she’d been harassed.

Thanks to medication, therapy, a phenomenal psychiatrist, and a large network of supportive family and friends, Lisa completely recovered. “When I look back, I’m amazed that I survived such an ordeal,” says Lisa. She didn’t just survive, she thrived and used the lessons she’d learned as a first-time mental patient to raise awareness about the devastating effects of workplace bullying and the mental illness that follows. Moreover, she shares with audiences her faith journey from victim to victorious to show what success can look like with the proper mental health treatment.

Lisa’s courageous story has helped many people gain a better understanding of mental illness, such as:

* Awareness for what the early signs of depression can look like
* Mental illness is nondiscriminatory and can strike anyone at anytime
* Suicide does not have to be the end
* There are many resources available to help treat and manage mental illness

While she was disabled from working as a result of the bullying, Lisa reported her subsequent mental illness to the Office of Workers’ Compensations Programs, as an occupational injury. It was at this time that Lisa discovered an unexpected and alarming concern: the current workers’ compensation system was inadequate at handling work-related mental illness claims. “Anyone who has suffered a psychological disability from events on the job should not have to fight with a bureaucracy for rightful compensation,” says Lisa.

This antiquated system that is supposed to assist injured workers in their time of need, instead treats mentally-impaired workers with suspicion, as if it is their fault that they developed a mental condition during the course of their employment. This same system unrealistically expects traumatized workers to return to the workplace prematurely. Lisa knows the challenges that lie ahead for lobbying workers’ compensation for friendlier laws regarding work-acquired mental illness. It’s a cause that she is willing to take on for the rest of her life. Lisa declares that it’s one thing to be bullied out of your job; it’s quite another thing to be bullied by a system that you’re depending on for your economic recovery after you’ve been hurt on the job.

In addition to raising awareness about mental illness, particularly in the African American community where mental illness is rarely discussed, Lisa has expanded her advocacy efforts to rally for safer workplaces. She would like to see laws passed that would make bullying in the workplace a punishable offense.

In the meantime, Lisa has proposed that employers host Mental Wellness Resources Days: days dedicated at the worksite that would provide a wealth of resources for employees to proactively protect their mental health before a work crisis erupts. Lisa’s efforts haven’t gone unnoticed. She was able to garner support from a representative from her city council, Laurie-Anne Sayles. Mrs. Sayles formed the Health and Wellness Committee to encompass health initiatives and priorities city-wide, an impressive accomplishment for a budding advocate!

By far, Lisa’s most rewarding experience since she became a voice for stigma-free mental illness and bully-free workplaces came when she returned to the same facility that had saved her life years before. Lisa was the guest speaker for a family support group whose loved ones were in behavioral health treatment. She reminded her audience that the sky was the limit for mental health recovery, with the right support and unwavering advocacy!

Lisa has written a book--Thirteen Geese in Flight: One Black Woman’s Ascent into Mental Illness--to soften the stigma that is often associated with mental illness and stress the importance of access to good mental health care.