When Institutions Are Libel for Bullying

There are students who bully and there are students who are targeted. Often there are bystanders who may or may not act to help the targeted individual. Most, it would seem, just watch and stay silent. The same is true in the adult world. There are adults who harass others adults, and there are adults who see what is happening and do nothing. By doing nothing, they support the harassment. In schools, there are students who have witnessed a bullying event and do not get involved; worse, and far too often, there are staff members who fail to act after witnessing some form of harassment.

To witness bullying/harassing behavior and not intervene is sometimes understandable of students who fear retaliation, but when an adult sees someone being bullied, all the key players—the targeted student, the student observers, and even the bully—likely believe that the adult will intervene if s/he thinks the action is wrong. Lack of action, therefore, leads those key players to conclude that the target must have deserved it, the bully was only doing what was needed, and the students watching have no business interfering.

Sometimes the situation is even more complicated. When the harassment is not dealt with because the reputation of an organization—perhaps the senior class, the football team, or the whole school—would be tarnished, the environment promotes institutional bullying. More simply, when the individuals in charge support the harassment by being silent, the institution is libel.

I would like to introduce two authors whose books speak to this issue: Joshua C. Cohen (JCC), an American author of the book *Leverage,* and David Gregory (DG), an Australian author of the book *Fight to the End.* (Summaries of these books are in the sidebar on page 94.)

DG: The issue of institutional bullying in schools remains significant in Australia. The culture in schools is shaped and reenforced by teachers, who have immense power over the tone of the school. Since leaving college, I've met a number of former students who had been there at different times, and we had many of the same experiences. The common factor was that the teachers knew about what was going on, but never did anything about it. Unfortunately, the school's nice reputation seems far more important than dealing with a horrible and destructive culture within.

CJB: Josh, why did you write *Leverage*?

JCC: I really like stories about underdogs and odd couples. I also love sports of all kinds, more as a participant than a bleacher creature. The actual story didn't come into place immediately, but all the surrounding elements and characters did. Then I read a horrible account about a football camp where the seniors attacked the freshmen in much the same way I describe in my book. Something about that news account spoke to me, and I really wanted to give voice to the victims and witnesses of an assault who believe, due to institutional circumstances, they must remain silent. It's a powerful fear and, as you hinted, despotic regimes operate more by the threat of terror than actually committing the acts of

terror themselves. That we can be cowed so easily and repeatedly, I find fascinating as well as horrifying.

CJB: When I first read *Leverage*, Josh, I was immediately hooked by the two main characters. Both were instantly endearing, but I could feel the danger ahead of them.

David, why did you write *Fight to the End?*

DG: I wrote *Fight to the End* because it was a good way of dealing with a situation that had almost crippled me personally, and I wanted to give the reader a sense of hope. The worst thing about being a teenager and being bullied is that you feel so isolated and alone, and you don't realize that life isn't all like this. I hoped to provide a narrative that still demonstrates a glimmer of hope, in spite of what may seem an overwhelming situation.

CJB: I couldn't help but wonder if your dedication—*In memory of Darren Steele 1983–1998,* was a driving force that helped you complete the book.

DG: Talking about the dedication is very hard for me. Although I never knew Darren Steele, who was an English boy in high school around the same time I was, I read the newspaper articles over and over again, how he was relentlessly bullied and eventually committed suicide. The story touched me so much. The school knew what was going on yet did nothing to stop it. I wish I could have been there for Darren and been able to be that hand on his shoulder to let him know he was safe and that everything was going to be ok. Maybe he'd still be here.

CJB: I can understand and relate to that need to somehow honor a person in a way that will remind people of what he endured. The word *bullycide* came into being in 2002 when researchers Neil Marr and Tim Field published *Bullycide: Death at Playtime—An Expose of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying* in which they presented their research on British children who had killed themselves because bullying made life more painful than dying. Marr and Field reported Britain's first bullycide was 11-year-old Steven Shepherd in 1967. The youngest bullycide in Britain was 8-year-old Marie Bentham; she hanged herself with her jump rope from her bedroom doorknob. Darren Steele committed bullycide and you, David, have honored him.

Josh, tell me about your main characters. How did they come to be?

JCC: I really wanted to write a story that paired two individuals who, on the surface, seemed like polar opposites from each other. As I said, I love odd-couple pairings in literature and the movies, and I really wanted to pursue this in my own writing. Delving further, I wanted one boy, Danny, to be unusually small, so to the outside world he seems like a little runt, but on the inside he is prideful and feisty. The other boy, Kurt, is someone who, to the outside world, looks like the Incredible Hulk and is expected to act accordingly. But because of Kurt's history of abuse, he's really like a whipped dog that simply wants to avoid confrontation at all costs—except when he's on the football field and can unleash all of his pent-up frustration and rage.

DG: Much of the character of Michael is based on my experiences at school. It was actually in my Year 11 that I wrote the first draft of the story. Much of what happened there formed the basis for the character of Michael. I found it to be a very good way of dealing with what was going on at school. The character of Xavier is based upon a friend of mine who I met a couple of years after school. At this point, I became quite serious about telling the story of bullying and adapted this friendship to the situation of my school experience.

CJB: I kept looking for a solid adult role model in these two books, and with the exception of Deputy Forbes in David's book, I really could not find one. Adults are often eliminated from YA books. Why is that?

DG: Sadly, there were no solid adult role models in my school, and the character of Forbes is again a literary fiction, which I added because I wanted to provide the reader with a sense of hope that someone would listen, someone would intervene. Where there is a toxic culture, there needs to be a person who stands up and says enough is enough. I believe the solid adult

role models are eliminated from many YA books because teenagers feel alienated and unable to trust adults. The support of a friend or a peer is much more powerful than the intervention of an adult. From my point of view, despite the good intentions of Forbes, it's still the boys who are forced to deal with the problems themselves, which I believe is often the case.

JCC: For me, looking back at high school and middle school, adults felt pretty secondary from the moment you got on the school bus until the time you arrived home—which was most of your waking hours. You could have the most supportive and loving parents in the world, but that didn't really mean squat if you were alone in the school hallway getting roughed up by some older kids or being singled out in the lunchroom for humiliation. So when I write a story set in high school in the voice of teens, I purposely put the adult figures in the background, because I think that's how most teens view them. Of course adults—especially parents and teachers and coaches—have a *huge* impact on the lives of teens, but from the teen's perspective, we adults simply don't get it.

CJB: There are adults in each book who betray the main characters and the responsibilities that come with their jobs in such a way that it is institutional harassment. Do you see examples of this in your countries and around the world? In the US, the Penn State coverup comes to mind—which I know came after your book was written, Josh.

JCC: I find the Penn State situation so maddening and so awful *precisely because* they were adults (and not teens) abdicating their authority and willing to look the other way. When I read about the assistant coach Mike McQueary walking in on a ten-year-old boy being raped by the assistant coach Jerry Sandusky and being so shocked by the scene that he couldn't speak and simply left—*left the boy alone with this monster*!—I can't really convey how much of a moral failing this is. McQueary's excuse later was that he was in fear of losing his job, and he didn't want to make waves. How about the boy being attacked? So what does he do? He reports it the next day to the head coach, and the head coach passes the report up the line. No one thought to actually confront the monster Sandusky, because no one wanted to tarnish the image of Penn State football.

As you mention, CJ, all of this came to light well after my book, *Leverage,* was published, and it makes me just shake my head and think that the world doesn't seem to learn any lessons. Transparency should be a requirement in any institution where adults or older kids are interacting with children too young to understand how they can be bullied, intimidated, and threatened into silence. That means, for instance, not allowing vulnerable kids alone with adults in windowless rooms or other spaces where they can not be easily monitored.

DG: From my own experiences at school and in two schools in which I have worked, I found there to be an attitude that kids can sort out the problems themselves, or "it's ok to turn a blind eye to certain people and behaviours." This certainly shaped how I developed the narative of betrayal and alienation. What frustrated me was the fact that it occurred time and time again in each of these schools. The desire to promote the public face of the school as caring was more important than actually caring for the students, which really disturbed me as it should everyone.

I see stark and disturbing parallels to other incidents of institutionalised bullying in the case of Penn State. People seem to put more effort and energy into covering up a toxic culture of abuse rather than dealing with it head on. The principal of my school made a comment to my parents a couple of years after I left. He said, "If he had stayed any longer, he would have had to start formal proceedings against some staff members." This is an abhorent comment, similar to the pathetic responses of the staff at Penn State, especially when put in the context that he actually knew what was going on at the school. He knew the staff involved and the extent to which they were involved, yet he failed to do anything about it, which was also later proved in court. The desire to cover up hideous behaviour to "protect" an image of the staff involved and the organisation as a whole, rather than helping

protect students, is something that sadly keeps repeating itself.

CJB: Both of your books are very visual for me—almost like watching a movie. Was that your intent or did it just happen?

DG: I never really intended for the story to develop that way, but when it did, I thought it worked well, and I actually rewrote several parts to follow this style. It is a way of reading I have always enjoyed, and I guess that rubbed off on me when I started to write.

JCC: I tend to see book chapters as scenes. If I can't imagine it occurring in front of my eyes, I have a hard time breathing life into it so, yes, it was intentional on my part—at least on a subconscious level.

CJB: Josh, in the rock-jumping scene in your book, and in your book David, when the boys escape—first to Michael's house and then when they escape even farther away—I felt such a rush of freedom, and I realized the tension I felt just reading these books was so small compared to what the characters were living. Was that your intention in these scenes? Did you need to give the kids some relief, some fun?

DG: With such a dark and troubled storyline, there had to be the release, an escape, a way out. Ultimately, there had to be hope. The real personalities of Michael and Xavier never come out until they escape from school. The way in which it cripples their sense of self-worth and their ability to be themsevles, for me, is central to the issue of bullying. Bullying damages lives in so many ways and can render bright, happy kids into emotionally troubled young adults. Getting away from the torment of school meant that the boys could finally be themselves. I wrote the escapes quite dramatically not only because of how important this was in saving both boys from the abuse at school, but to also reenfornce the fact they had to take it upon themselves to do something about the situation they were in. Their escape was empowering.

JCC: Yes! That was exactly what I wanted to convey. I also wanted a scene where Kurt understands that he can bond with these other guys (gymnasts) through their mutual appreciation for their beautiful surroundings and the physical challenges posed by this rock quarry on a glorious autumn day. In this scene, Kurt gets a chance to form friendships built on trust and camaraderie through rock climbing and not built on intimidation and fear that you must fall in line or be an outcast. The rock quarry scene also underscores how the later outing with his football captains on a hunting trip—also outdoors but on a cold, ugly day—conveys the exact opposite feeling when he is around these "teammates" who feel more like predators.

CJB: On a side note, I loved the scene when Kurt—the big, musclebound football player—asks the guys on the gymnasitics team to teach him to do a back flip. When he makes a touchdown, he will celebrate with that dazzling flip!

In closing, what is your hope for your two incredible books?

JCC: I hope that whoever reads this book is, first and foremost, entertained by an intense tale of courage in the face of real and unexpected adversity. I hope the book connects to readers and encourages a sense of empathy for two odd-duck boys who might otherwise be ignored or disdained. One of the great things about literature is its ability to let a reader walk in someone else's shoes for a bit. Our ability to empathize with others really is a sign of our own humanity and can solve a lot of problems on its own. My book, hopefully, provides a stepping stone in that direction.

DG: I hope that young people can read my story and get a sense of what is right and wrong in terms of how to treat others. Whilst it may be a bit too confronting for victims of bullying, for the bystander, I think it provides a valuable insight into how much hurt can be felt from bullying. Maybe next time a bullying incident happens, someone will step in and say enough is enough.

*Former high school English teacher **cj Bott** is an educational consultant on issues of bullying and harassment with a focus on prevention. She believes reading books that deal with bullying is the best way to help even our youngest students to see the injustice in supporting harassing behavior. Her books and website present hundreds of titles for children and teens that enable young people*

to think about what they need to do before they are involved in or witness bullying. More information can be found at her website, www.bulliesinbooks.com.

Australian author ***David Gregory*** *is involved in many things. He works with a number of schools in their residential outdoor education programs and is currently a director of outdoor education with a Melbourne school. David, a keen snow skier, is also heavily involved in Australian politics. In 2008, David took Farrer Agricultural High School (the school he attended) to court over bullying and was successful in proving systemic failure and the existence of a culture of abuse riddled throughout the school. David has since worked extensively with students, staff, and parents to examine ways of identifying and dealing with bullying within the school context.*

Josh Cohen *grew up in Minnesota as an avid fan of and participant in many sports, including Taekwondo, rock climbing, track, (peewee) football, the other football (soccer), gymnastics, and dance. His extensive training in gymnastics and dance enabled him to tour the world with dance companies such as MOMIX and musical theater shows such as West Side Story. He currently lives in New York City with his wife and young daughter. He also, unfortunately, remains a loyal fan of the Minnesota Vikings.*

Summaries of *Leverage* and *Fight to the End*

Leverage (Joshua C. Cohen, Dutton, 2011)
Available on Amazon, Kindle, and in USA bookstores; for more information go to leveragethebook.com

Two athletes, Kurt Brodsky and Danny Meehan, tell their stories about Oregrove High School. Kurt, a big, quiet boy new to the school and on the football team, has had a lonely, fear-ravaged, and horribly abusive past that causes him to stutter when he speaks. His new foster home is safe, and that is a miracle for him. Coach Brigs has given Kurt's foster mother extra cash to buy a TV so they can watch the replays of the school's football games on the community channel, because football is what this town is all about.

Danny, small but filled with dreams and the steps needed to climb them, can fly, and he does just that on the gymnastics team where he shows everyone his amazing skills. Everywhere else in the school he hides because the football team stomps on guys his size. To them, he is a joke. But Danny works hard all year; he even has a personal trainer during the summer because he wants a college scholarship.

The two become friends through two events: Kurt watches Danny's gymnastics team practicing and asks them to teach him the back-flip so that he can perform one in the end zone if he ever gets to make a touchdown, and both Danny and Kurt witness the rape of one of Danny's teammates by several of Kurt's teammates.

Fight to the End (David Gregory, William Watson & Sons, 2010)
Available on Amazon, Kindle, and iTunes

Set in an Australian private boys' school, Michael, year eleven, and Xavier, year nine and new to the school, become best friends because everyone else in the school hates and harasses them, particularly the senior boys, but also the staff and the administration. Deputy Forbes, also new to the school, is the only one who questions the abuse.

Michael Anderson lives off campus with his adoptive parents who do not want to be bothered with him and who always assume any problem is Michael's fault. When he first started at this school, Michael was actively involved in academics and interested in debate, and when the bullying started, he followed the rules and filed the necessary report time after time, only to have Mr. McGrain, Head of [student] Welfare, tell him that he was the problem and had better learn to get along with the senior boys. Of course, the harassment not only continued, it escalated.

Xavier Green has just entered the school; his parents are very involved with a new business and his father travels quite a bit. Xavier finds Michael an interesting guy, even though he has been warned to not socialize with him. However, Xavier realizes that Michael is someone who shares his intellectual interests. As their friendship grows, the senior boys extend their harassment to Xavier, which is exactly what Michael was afraid would happen.