Letters to the Editor

A Letter to My Abuser

On Monday, August 7, 2023, our beautiful girl, Tristan Kate Smith, ended her life.

Tristin was 28 years old, and the youngest of two brothers and three sisters. She was a daughter. She was an aunt. She was a friend. She was a nurse. Tristin was brave and beautiful and smart. She fought depression for a long time. With regret-filled hindsight, we can now see the signs for what they were. She never sought professional help, but her home was filled with evidence that she'd been trying to help herself. Her beloved dog, Calypso, and cat, Sphinx, wanted for nothing; Tristin spent her time and energy with them. We found more dog enrichment toys and contraptions than a single pet store sells. She had written and posted positive affirmations and mantras throughout her house. She displayed photos of herself with her friends, family, and pets. She had reached out to friends. She had reached out to family.

She tried so hard to stay alive, but none of it was enough to stop the darkness.

You're reading this now because Tristin's story needs to be told. We need to take action. Our nation's healthcare system is broken, and it broke our girl. Her passion for nursing had turned into a nightmare. Tristin was in trouble. Nurses are in trouble. Female nurses commit suicide at more than twice the rate of females in the general population. We must do better. Call or email your congresspeople. Tell them we can do better. Reach out to your friends in nursing and offer to listen. Help them get the help they need.

The following is a letter we discovered on Tristin Kate's laptop that she wrote in March of 2023:

Letter to My Abuser

Ever since I was young, I expressed interest in healthcare and becoming a nurse, so I began my study. I gave my heart. My body, and my mind to you; dedicated long hours and days and gave you my all. I have cried with patients, with their families, and for them. I held their hands, and they held mine as I moved forward in my nursing career. My patients and their families have been there for me, supported me, and reminded me why I do what I do. I thought that was enough; this would be all I needed to carry me through my career. I told you I would be there through the good and the bad, but you have taken my heart and slowly crushed the goodness it had. You love-bombed me with affection, and you told me I was going into a career that matters. I could make a difference.

Tristin Kate Smith
Feb. 21, 1995 - Aug. 7, 2023

You made me feel comfortable, despite the rumors of your abusive past - rumors I didn't want to believe. The compliments, the pizzas, and the thank you letters gradually had less meaning to me, though. The staff I worked beside began to go away. In your eyes, these staff were "unnecessary," but it came at a high cost for the advertised "quality care" provided to our patients by those of us who were left.

You asked my colleagues and me what we needed to help patients and improve satisfaction scores, and we told you the truth. But then you sent us to online courses that taught us to just smile more and be friendlier to the patients. That's when I began to understand your true cruelty and manipulation.

I remember the first time I heard about nurses getting hit. I remember that you asked them what they'd done - or didn't do - to prevent it from happening. "Don't protect yourself by fighting back," you said, "just lay with your hands over your head and wait until security comes." You created an environment of fear and blame in a place we already felt unsafe. You blamed us for things out of our control. You criminally charged my colleagues for things that happened as a direct result of your own actions. The law doesn't protect us, and neither do you.

I no longer feel like you care about me or the people you say you serve. I sit at my front desk just waiting for someone to walk in off the street and shoot my patients and me: you do not care about keeping us protected. You haven't provided even the slightest amount of security to keep us safe. You use and exploit us to line your pockets, using the common citizen's money for overpriced healthcare.

You are a narcissist. I can see you for what you really are. You say you care, but you ignore us while we beg on our hands and knees. You tell us we do so much and that we put up with so much. But when we dare to think we are finally going to get the love and support we deserve, we get a pizza party and free pens for the "healthcare heroes."

I so desperately want to continue to help people, but I cannot stay in this abusive relationship.

Each day, you ask me to do more with less.

You beat me to the point that my body and mind are black, bruised, and bleeding out.

I'm only sorry to my patients and colleagues. You deserve so much better, but my abusive partner is relentless.

If I stay, I will lose my sanity - and possibly my life - forever.

Ron Smith