Old fears bring out fresh tears

Conflict consultant **Caroline Dean**, of Lenah Valley, was shocked by what happened when she spoke out about being bullied

interview **TIM MARTAIN** photography **ROGER LOVELL**

I gave a TEDx talk in April in Queenstown, New Zealand. I was approached by someone familiar with my work as a conflict and anti-bullying consultant and advocate who suggested me to the TEDx committee and they liked the sound of it.

I was always keen to talk about my work and at the time that's what I thought I would be doing. But TEDx gives you a speaker coach and their job is to find your message.

I thought my message was that I had developed a different approach to bullying and had some success with my method [which is based on restorative justice principles, where the bully is seen as a product of their circumstances and both bully and victim are treated as parts of a wider system that may be failing].

But my coach thought my message was my personal story of being bullied in the workplace. He was able to get things out of me that I hadn't intended to tell him. He drew my story out of me bit by bit.

When you're writing down your story, there is a distance you can keep from it. And because the whole talk was so honed – I had lived and breathed it for six weeks – I was able to distance myself from it a little.

When I got to New Zealand, I had four days to prepare. As the day got closer, I started forgetting what I had to say. By the night before the talk, I wasn't sure I could go through with it.

I didn't realise I was traumatising myself by reliving it. And I was going to be putting myself out there by talking about it.

A big part of the trauma from bullying is from the feeling you are showing what you perceive as weakness.

On the morning of the talk I had a meltdown. The TEDx people were very kind and provided someone to help me. They got me to write out my speech in a little book to read from on stage. Once I was up there, I was glued to the spot. There was no way I was moving. Other people are very animated but I physically couldn't do that.

I didn't realise until just before I went on that my biggest issue was simply that I was going to be publicly talking about it.

I was really clear about my feelings about it, but hadn't articulated to anyone at TEDx what a big deal this was to me. It was actually one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

I felt so much shame in admitting I had succumbed to bullying that I had a breakdown after talking about it that day.

It took me six weeks to get over it. I have done a lot over the past few years to sort out my trauma and help others through the same thing, but I didn't realise how easily and quickly that trauma could be reignited.

I was a bit paralysed by it. I felt deeply humiliated. I asked my daughter afterwards if I humiliated myself. She said no, of course, but that was how I was feeling. I couldn't think about anything else, I analysed it over and over.

But the talk was very well received. There were people coming up to me for days afterwards in Queenstown and emailing me about it. So the things I was feeling were not congruent with the feedback I was getting.

Professionally, for me, that was really helpful. A lot of my pro bono work is with people who have been bullied, and for me it was powerful to be able to experience that and be in the moment with that shame and humiliation.

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Intellectually, I knew all this, but had not physically and emotionally experienced it. Shame is present in any kind of abuse but is the one thing we don't talk about, so it has given me a proper integrated understanding that I didn't have before.

The other thing the TEDx talk helped me realise is how we don't tend to talk about the effect of bullying as being trauma. We are only just starting to talk about it as a mental health issue. It is abuse like any other and it has the same effects on people. We don't expect people who have been in other abusive situations to just leave that situation and recover, yet we expect that of people who have had to work in a toxic environment. I think all of this understanding has helped my healing.

■ *Watch Caroline Dean's story at youtu.be/nG1oCUOijPO*

■ *For 24/7 support, call Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800, Lifeline on 131 114 or visit headspace.org.au*