Memorial for Kroger worker harassed into suicide by manager for wearing face mask

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Approximately fifty people crowded the sidewalks outside a Milford, Ohio, Kroger store Saturday to protest the death of Evan Seyfried, a 40-year-old dairy supervisor. Family and coworkers assert that Seyfried committed suicide after facing harassment by the store's manager. The Evan Seyfried Memorial—comprised of Evan's family, friends, former coworkers, and Kroger customers, among others—demanded "justice for Evan" as passing motorists honked their support, raised their fists in solidarity, and chanted slogans along with the protesters.

"Justice for Evan" was the overriding theme of the event, a theme which also gives name to a Facebook group and Twitter hashtag by Seyfried's friends and family, who are intent on spreading the word about what was done to Evan and what is still being done to current Milford Kroger employees who are also harassed daily. Former employees, with alarming first-person accounts, were well-represented at the gathering.

The tone was a mixture of somber reflection, celebration of the gentle, loving person Evan was, and angry demands that guilty individuals face legal consequences for their deplorable actions. Likewise, many in attendance voiced their outrage at The Kroger Company as a whole for not only allowing this to happen but also for fostering a toxic work environment that encourages such behavior; anger at the United Food and Commercial Workers union for sitting on grievances from Evan and a number of other employees; and disappointment at the media whose coverage of the event has been scant.

Seyfried's father, Kenneth Seyfried, has filed a wrongful death lawsuit filed against The Kroger Company detailing the harassment that started in October of 2020 when Evan opted to wear a mask during his shifts, to the outrage of store's right-wing manager, Shannon Frazee. Frazee "began a campaign dedicated to ousting Evan while proclaiming her intention to make Evan's life a 'living hell'," says Kenneth Seyfried's attorney, Austin LiPuma.

According to the lawsuit, Frazee's comprehensive harassment took many forms, ranging from mocking him in front of coworkers for wearing a mask to protect himself, coworkers, and customers from the spread of COVID-19, and in-store activity intent on blemishing Seyfried's work record to pave the way for his termination, up to and including, according to the lawsuit, sexual harassment, having people follow him home from work and park for long periods outside his house, and the texting of child pornography to his phone. In short, the suit alleges Frazee attempted to torture Seyfried and create cause, whenever and however she could, to summarily terminate his employment.

Former dairy coworker Courtney Cullum called him "an absolute sweetheart," who "bent over backwards to help people." Cullum, who was pregnant at the time, recalls "working alongside Evan to dig [her] trucks out" because "nobody else would help."

Trevor, another Kroger coworker, remembers Evan as "a really good, humble, down-to-earth person," and a "dedicated and hardworking" employee. "He would stay extra hours if he needed to," says Trevor. "He would come in for extra hours if he needed to. I mean, he did everything for Shannon [Frazee]."

Lindsay Phaneuf, Seyfried's former girlfriend and coworker at the Anderson Township Kroger store before he transferred to Milford, said, "He was a kind, caring and helpful person who enjoyed his job."

An outpouring of emotion from many other friends and loved ones paints a similar picture of kindness and dedication. One cousin said of Evan, "[H]e was just a gentle soul, really, in many ways, and he always had a smile on his face … He was just a really happy guy … He kind of would be the last one you think would be treated that way, and he would have an end like he had."

Amy, Seyfried's girlfriend, said, "He was the sweetest guy I've ever met. He was my best friend—my soul mate. I knew that it was a bad situation there, but I did not realize how bad until I read the court filings. And, I just feel horrible that there … I feel like I should have known more going on, but I didn't."

Seyfried's aunt says, "He was a good son to his parents. My brother tells me he did everything for them. He visited them often."

Hayley Wardlaw, Seyfried's ex-sister-in-law, says Seyfried was a "good person" who was excited to go into the Kroger management program.

Linda, a Seyfried family friend, called Seyfried "a good, kindhearted person," and former neighbor Paul Denu said Evan was "a very gentle, kind person that would never cause any problem."

Evan's uncle, Joe Seyfried, said of his nephew, "I never heard a negative thing about him. Very easygoing, agreeable, hard-working. He did well at Kroger, the time he was there. Things didn't start to deteriorate until he got here [at the Milford location]. The reason he landed here was, he was accommodating another employee …That person had problems at home and wanted to be closer to home, so he [Evan] switched with him. That's just

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the type of person he was."

Phaneuf added, "I worked with Evan for seven years, and he was always really happy at the Anderson Township Kroger…Evan was never bullied until he moved to Milford."

Trevor a former worker at the store, described the abuse Frazee meted out on employees, saying she would visit "different departments and talk crap about Dairy, Evan … She talked bad about everybody. She'd go to each department — she'd act like your best friend, and then she would just talk smack to the next person about you."

"She targets people just for anything and everything," Cullum said. "Pretty much if you're not the type of person she wants in her store she will get you out. She targeted me when I was pregnant because I was struggling … She sabotages people; that's just how she is."

Former Kroger employee Carl Fortner, falsely accused of taking an unauthorized break, recalls one day in particular during which Frazee was on a mission to dispense with whomever she could. Fortner says:

"They were about to pay us for [the supplemental 'hero' pay], and the … district manager came in here and told Shannon, "Somebody's got to go today. So, you've got to go around here and see who's doing something wrong and get rid of them" … Everybody — word got around the whole building. A girl came outside and said, 'Hey, Carl, you've got to be careful because they're firing people.' … So, then I go in there [gestures toward store] and I'm talking to them, and they tell me, "Okay, we're going to suspend you till further investigation."

Five days later, Ellen Jackson, a Milford Kroger and 27-year Kroger veteran and Fortner's mother-in-law, was fired on the flimsiest of pretexts. Fortner says, "My mother-in-law comes through the door and said, 'Hey, they fired me.' I said, 'Fired you for what?' She said, 'I didn't put the meat temperature on the paperwork, and, Carl, I do this every day; I know what I'm doing.'" Jackson suffered months of depression, Fortner said, during which she seldom left her bedroom.

Joe Pigg, an assistant manager and Frazee's alleged accomplice according to the lawsuit, has also been accused of, among other things, bullying, and sexually harassing young, female employees. Fortner says:

"I saw a lot of abuse to the young girls. I mean, they would mess with them. Like, one girl I know named Katie … She ran out of the store because they were bullying her … They just kept pressing her. Like, she was doing work, but they kept, like, getting on her nerves because she was talking to the other young girls who had made something against Joe [Pigg]. At that time, I didn't know Joe was really, like, pressing the girls and talking to them the way he was doing, but there was a lot of little young girls who used to hang around him and thought he was cool.

So, me, I come to work every day, and I see them in the cafeteria, and I see the total difference of them because they don't want to be around him. So, what Katie did, Katie got with the two girls who were really against Joe and helped them sign a grievance to the union. And, once she did that, then they were ready to get her out of the way."

Seyfried himself attempted to aid two employees who said they had been sexually harassed by Pigg, escorting them to the union representative for the purpose of filing a grievance. Pigg was not punished but was transferred from the store, only to be transferred back to the Milford store two weeks later as security manager.

Media coverage of the Evan's case, said several in attendance at the memorial, has been insufficient. Regarding the coverage, Evan's uncle Joe Seyfried is "disappointed as hell," but isn't surprised. Kroger, he says, is a big advertiser, especially on WLWT.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Kim, a Kroger customer and Memorial attendee. Were the stations to publicize the incident, she says, Kroger would take away their add revenue. Kim vows neve to shop at Kroger again.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), likewise, supposedly representing Kroger workers, has remained as silent after Evan's death as it was during his prolonged harassment. Seyfried reported Frazee and Pigg's behavior, to no avail. The union also failed to take prompt action when complaints were made by a coworker on Seyfried's behalf.

The UFCW has also failed other Kroger employees. Fortner, for example, paid dues regularly for many months and was never given a union card. During his preposterous dismissal, union reps treated Fortner as if filing the grievance was an imposition. Seyfried himself said he feared the union was working with Kroger.

Significantly, the UFCW did not send any representatives to the memorial.

The UFCW has been working to keep Kroger workers in Arkansas, West Virginia and elsewhere and other workers in the food industry on the job during the pandemic. This has taken a particularly grotesque form in the meatpacking industry, where the UFCW collaborated with management at a Tyson plant in Waterloo to implement a perfect attendance bonus during the initial surge of the pandemic, even as managers were taking bets on how many workers would become infected. More than 1,000 workers at the facility became sick with COVID-19, and five have died.

This points to the need for workers to take their own initiative by forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to prevent tragic deaths such as Seyfried's from happening again.

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