

Terrorization of Frances Widdowson by Mike Quinn at MRU - December 20, 2021

Account of Frances Widdowson (assisted by a recording made on December 21, 2021 in a meeting with Lee Easton, President, MRFA, Kelly Sundberg, Vice-President Policy and Senior Grievance Officer, MRFA, and Derrick Antson, Labour Relations Officer, MRFA) compiled January 1, 2022.

Approximately 5:20 p.m.

I was holding an exam for my class, PLSC 1101-001/002, in Room B101 from 3:00-6:00 p.m.. All students completed the exam by 5:15 p.m. I spent a few minutes talking to the final student who had completed the exam about her missing paper, and she agreed to provide it by email so that I could decide what to do about it. After she left, I looked around the room and turned off the lights and walked out of the classroom. As I was walking toward the exit of the main building towards my office in the EA building, along the hallway beside Room B101, I heard someone approaching me from behind and calling: “Dr. Widdowson, Dr. Widdowson”. I thought it was a student who wanted to talk to me about the class.

As I turned around, I saw that it was Mike Quinn, the Vice-Provost, Associate Vice-President, Academic. Quinn was wearing a mask because of Covid, and all I could see were his beckoning eyes. Quinn said “I think we’ve met before” and “Can you just step in here for a minute?”. I said yes, we had met in his interview for the Vice-Provost position a while back, and “O.K.” to his request. Quinn then gestured for me to follow him and opened a door into a classroom across the hall from B101. As I had been on a Livestream that morning with Quinn when we had both asked the candidate for the Canada Research Chair position in indigenous studies, Dr. Robert Caldwell, questions, I assumed Quinn was approaching me as a colleague about my opinion about the candidate. I thought perhaps that the hiring committee was meeting to discuss it in the room. When I entered, however, I looked over and saw two women at the other end of the room. They were wearing masks like Quinn and were sitting across from one another at a table obviously waiting for me. One person, who I recognized, was Sara Gibson, who was sitting with her back to the hallway from which I had entered. The other woman had a similar haircut to the Acting Provost, Elizabeth Evans, but her hair was grey and not brown. When I saw Sara Gibson, I knew that it was going to be a disciplinary meeting (as she had been sitting in on the December 13, 2021 meeting with the Provost, Elizabeth Evans, discussing the possibility of discipline). At this point, I immediately wanted to have union representation, which is a requirement in the Collective Agreement. I said “I’m not going to have this meeting like this; I need notice” and turned to leave the room so that I could go to my office and call my union representative.

When I turned to leave the room, Quinn moved around to my left and positioned himself in front of me, blocking the door out, and said something like “after careful consideration we have decided to...” as he tried to push an envelope into my hand. I told him that I needed notice for this process and began to panic because he was blocking the door and trying to prevent me from leaving. I was already in a state of extreme anxiety because of how I had been ambushed and lured into a room under false pretences. Now I was in a classroom with three people hostile to my interests at the university after hours. All I saw was Quinn’s angry eyes staring down at me from his masked face. In terror, I yelled, “Get away from the door, you are forcibly confining me”. Quinn moved to the side, and I burst out into the hallway and said as I left – “Send me notice!”, as I wanted to have a union representative at the next meeting.

I ran back to my office so that I could call my union representative, Kelly Sundberg. Shaking and highly agitated, I entered my office and sat down, and found that I couldn't get into my email because it had been blocked by MRU and therefore could I not access Sundberg's details. I then took out my daytimer and called a colleague, [Redacted]. I told her what had happened and asked her to get Dr. Sundberg or Lee Easton, the President of the MRFA, to call me on my cell phone.

At that point I realized that I would need to get out of my office and leave MRU so that I could talk to a union representative about my rights. I had my exams in my backpack, which I did not want to have taken from me, as I had spent three months preparing my students for this final assessment. I was the only one who could evaluate their efforts, and had knowledge of their work so far. I looked around for what was most dear to me, and saw two signed copies of my book *Indigenizing the University: Diverse Perspectives*, which I had not yet delivered to colleagues. I put these in a box and opened the door. Outside the door was Mike Quinn, looming in a sinister fashion outside my door trying to push an envelope into my hand. He was moving towards me.

I could not believe that Quinn was again trying to impose himself upon me physically after the altercation in the classroom. In terror, I screamed at Quinn to get away from me and that he was threatening and intimidating me. At this point, [Redacted], came running out of his office near the end of the hall, and asked "Frances, are you alright?". I yelled, no, I was not alright, and Quinn had tried to forcibly confine me in a classroom and I felt very threatened. As it seemed as if Quinn was trying to enter into my office, I slammed the door in his face and called 911 because I didn't know what else to do.

I told the 911 operator that Mike Quinn had tried to forcibly confine me in a classroom and he was now threatening me. She wanted to know the address but I couldn't remember it. As she was trying to get more details from me, I started to feel the walls closing in and became hysterical. I realized that I would need to get out of the building so that I could speak to a union representative and find out my rights.

As I opened the door, I saw that, standing to my left, outside of the Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies Office and about fifteen feet away was a crowd of people (I am not sure of the exact number, perhaps between 5-10 people). One of the people was Sara Gibson, and I assumed that the others were also MRU administrators because I didn't recognize any of them. They looked like they were intending to surround me after Quinn moved into my office. I also saw that, at each end of the hall were security guards, and I again panicked because they were positioned in such a way that I thought that they would try to stop me from leaving. I yelled at Quinn to get away from me. He said something, in a menacing tone, to the effect of: "I'm going to have to take your exams". I thought at that point that I was going to be physically restrained, and perhaps wrestled to the ground by security, and so I said "Don't touch me, get back. I've called the police and I'm going to talk to them. No one try to stop me" and rushed down the hall, across the landing beside the Knuckle (a reception room on the right hand side) and out the door. I ran down to my car, which was parked behind the Riddell Library, and my cell phone was ringing. I tried to answer it, but couldn't get to it in time. I got into the car, locked the door, and completely broke down. I was shaking and crying uncontrollably.

Now that I felt safe, I realized, at that point, that I had called 911 and it was no longer an emergency. I called the operator and said that I had been in a completely panic stricken state when I called before, but that I was now safe and resources should not be diverted to me from emergencies. The police said that a car was on its way and would be there in about 10 minutes. I then called [Redacted] and asked her for the numbers again, as I had missed a call. She told me Lee Easton's number. I called

Easton, and was crying hysterically. He asked me if I wanted him to come to the university, and whether my husband Albert could come. I said Albert couldn't come because I had the car, and sobbed that yes, I would like Easton to come. He said that he would be there in about 15 minutes. I then called my husband, Albert, and told him that I had been through a terrible situation, and that Mike Quinn had tried to forcibly confine me. Albert was very angry. At that point, the police arrived and I told Albert that I needed to talk to them and Lee Easton. I would call him back after I had done this.

Two police officers arrived. I apologized because I realized that I was now safe and they might have been diverted from an emergency. I said that Mike Quinn had tried to forcibly confine me in a classroom and had terrorized me, and I didn't know what to do so I felt I had to call 911. I said I needed to speak to my union representative to find out what my rights were. They nodded understandingly. I said that I was going to do that shortly, and asked for their names and the case number. One police officer's name was Kress and the number he gave me was 21504468.

At that point, I saw a security guard walking down the hill towards my car, and I began to feel the panic rising once again. I realized that I was still on MRU property, and wanted to leave to a neutral location so that I could talk to Lee Easton. The other police walked over to talk to the Security Guard. After a few minutes, he came back saying that I had some property of the university. I said that this was a matter under dispute, and I needed to talk to my union representative about it. I got into my car, waved to the police officers, and drove to Spot On, a bar a few minutes away. There I called Lee Easton and asked for him to meet me there.

I entered into Spot On, still shaken, and ordered a drink to calm my nerves. My cell phone's battery had gone dead, making it impossible to call Albert, which caused me more anxiety. Easton arrived and was very sympathetic. He asked me what I wanted. I said that I would like to mark my exams and assign my grades because I was the only one who knew the students. I had already assigned grades for my other class, and MRU had allowed me to do this. Why were they intervening now, and not after the grades had been entered? I said that it seemed like they were doing this to paint me as a person not to be trusted with students, even though they had allowed me to invigilate an exam, in person, with 60 of them. It seemed to me that they were trying to cause me maximum humiliation to intimidate me and make me agree to things that would violate my rights.

Easton said that he would talk to Amy Nixon, legal council for MRU, and would make these requests. He said that he thought it was unlikely that I could mark the exams because he believed that it was written on the front that they were MRU's property.

Easton stepped outside to talk to Nixon. He came back in and said, first of all, that Nixon wanted to know if I was safe. I laughed bitterly. Here was the person who had created an unsafe environment, which was completely unnecessary, and then was asking about my welfare. I thought this was a cynical ploy to protect the university from legal action. It was like when the university would do things to damage your mental health and then provide you with a leaflet about mental health services. Easton said he was just relaying what she said. Easton then said that MRU wanted to serve me with the termination letter and the reason why they had ambushed me was because this was my "last day on campus". I would have to give the exams back because I was no longer an employee of MRU. These could be sent by courier tomorrow, after they had sent the termination letter to my house (December 21). The MRFA wanted to talk to their lawyer in the morning before the arrangements were made just to make sure that this was the legal landscape we were dealing with. At that point, Lee Easton asked if I would be able to make it home o.k. I told him that I hoped so.

I drove back to my house in a numb state thinking highly irrational thoughts. I even imagined driving my car off the road in the hopes of ending my life. I then told myself that many people cared about me, I had done nothing wrong, and that I needed to muster all the strength that I had to fight the administration at MRU for what they had done to me. This pep talk to myself gave me a new sense of purpose, and I felt a little more calm.

When I arrived home, I talked to Albert about the ordeal, and then phoned [Redacted] and [Redacted] (who had called me after [Redacted] called her). Albert also told me that one of my colleagues, [Redacted], had phoned because he had received an email that I was no longer a faculty member at MRU. I felt calm at that point.

When I went to bed, however, I couldn't sleep. I kept on having flashbacks of Mike Quinn angrily staring down at me, and the relived the panic I had felt over and over again. I was awake all night, and this is the circumstance that continues to haunt me. Although I don't use these words lightly, I believe that I have been traumatized by MRU's actions. It is now very difficult for me to function on a day to day basis as I cannot stop re-experiencing the events of the evening of December 20. I cannot sleep properly and am plagued by anxiety attacks. I still find it hard to deal with the betrayal, the intimidation, the humiliation, and the completely unnecessary threatening behaviour that I experienced that night.

This is particularly disturbing because, in my termination letter from December 20, 2021 (which was couriered to me the day after the terrorization), President Tim Rahilly states the following: "You are obligated to provide to the Office of the Dean of Arts, any and all existing grades, gradebooks, coursework and exams of your students from the Fall 2021 semester. This must be complete by the end of the work day tomorrow, December 21, 2021". This meant that the ambush and demand for my exams was completely arbitrary and, in fact, in contradiction to President Rahilly's directions. As even MRU had officially stated that I had until December 21 to return my exams, why was Mike Quinn and other Human Resources personnel intimidating me after hours and demanding that I release my exams to him on December 20? It seems as if Quinn had some animosity towards me, which resulted in him abusing his power to humiliate and terrorize me in the workplace.