

I am writing this submission to the Royal Commission on Family Violence to highlight the ways that vengeful ex-partners can use the current court system to systematically re-victimise, demoralise and essentially terrorise victims of Domestic Violence. Mine is just one story of so many but I feel the need to tell it, if only for my personal healing.

I met my ex-husband when I was [REDACTED] years of age. We were together for [REDACTED] years and have three sons aged [REDACTED]. My [REDACTED]. I suffer from PTSD since I left him, I have trouble sleeping, and experience nightmares nearly every night. I have severe anxiety attacks, almost constant headaches, and tiredness. I have trouble concentrating and focusing. I have been in counselling with a Domestic Violence counsellor for nearly 2 years.

It was a whirlwind romance, where he won me over with his charm and intelligence, putting me on a pedestal. We have moved into together within a few weeks of dating. The abuse wasn't immediate but started to show around 6 months into the relationship. It was an insidious creep of abuse. So slow that I just thought it was a normal part of a relationship.

He started to display a need to control every move I made, questioning me about everything and being jealous of my relationships with co-workers, friends or even people I dealt with in stores or over the phone. He once threatened to "knock me into next week" for complaining about his involvement in a pyramid selling scheme.

I feel pregnant with my eldest child in [REDACTED] and we got married. This seemed to be a trigger for him to ramp up his abuse. This was when the verbal and mental abuse started to become the most evident. He would scream at me nearly every day, swearing, calling me names, putting me down for being stupid or lazy. He would put me down in front of family and friends, scream at me while I was on the phone, controlling who I was or spoke with.

He would start to grab me and push me around, always being careful not to hit me anywhere where the bruises would be visible. He focused a lot of his verbal and physical abuse on our oldest son, who has scars on his arms from his father scratching him. He once sat on his child on the floor with me trying to pull him off our son. He would kick him in the stomach and legs while our child was laying on the floor. I would put myself between them, trying to take the abuse to protect my son.

In [REDACTED] the police attended our home after a very scary incident where he threatened to kill me. The police removed an unregistered semi-automatic rifle though they left him alone with me and our young child. He was unlicensed and they removed the gun. I attempted to leave him shortly after this but he told me if I left that I would never see my son again. He had engaged a lawyer the day after I left him, attempting to gain full custody of our son. I returned home to him.

The abuse continued to get worse over the following years. I was isolated, he controlled all the money, tracked my phone calls, checked my mobile phone frequently and had a key-tracking program on my computer, banning me from going to certain websites. He installed a camera in our bedroom. I had purchased an emergency phone and he was able to locate it from seeing me hide it in my bedroom drawer, through the camera. I was put under "house-arrest" for a period of [REDACTED] for defying him. He took my mobile phone, home phone, computer, and car keys to keep me isolated for this time.

The abuse has escalated to sexual assault at this stage. His anger was over-whelming, all consuming, turning me numb from the constant abuse. I managed to care for the children but I felt like a robot, always walking on egg-shells, trying to not upset him in any way. I used to tell myself "I Can do just one more year. It will get better. Just one more year." It never got any better. I attempted to leave

him several more times during this period but he would threaten me "If you leave, you will never see the kids again and you'll be out on the street".

Finally in late [REDACTED] I decided that I couldn't do it anymore. I left him and our home to move into our rental property over two hour's drive away. I left with next to nothing. The kid's clothes, a few personal belongings and kid's toys and two dogs. I had to start again buying clothes, second hand furniture, bedding and kitchen ware. I had next to no money in the bank, relying on local opportunity stores and Centrelink for help.

I thought that leaving him would finally be an opportunity to start again, without the abuse. I couldn't have been more wrong. The anger that he has since displayed has been terrifying. I took out an application for the first AVO against him in early [REDACTED]. He responded by taking out one against me, attempting to have the children removed from my care. I agreed to a modified AVO to stop him from taking me to court. I had mine granted against him for a period of a year. In [REDACTED] my ex-husband took the two youngest children for 2 nights and kept them for [REDACTED] days. I had to obtain a Return order through the court to have them returned to my care.

In early [REDACTED], my eldest child went for a weekend stay with his father. He never came home. I saw him for a few weekends until [REDACTED] and I haven't seen or heard from him since. My ex-husband has told him so many lies that my son is now alienated from me. I cannot even send him Birthday or Christmas gifts as his father will not accept them. I had been sending these gifts to his school until my ex-husband accused me of harassment and I ceased sending anything via the school.

I have been to court in [REDACTED] over 30 times since I left him in [REDACTED]. I have court dates coming up in [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] in the coming months. I have also had to take the children to 2 x family court reports and I have been subjected to a psychiatric report.

In [REDACTED] we had a four-day trial set with the Federal Circuit court in [REDACTED] for custody. I had a Barrister set to represent me though Legal Aid. At 5pm on the Friday before the Monday start date, I was advised that Legal Aid had pulled my funding for the Barrister so I had to represent myself in court. There was simply no time to find another legal representative so I found myself at 10am on the Monday morning in court with two large folders in front of me, having no idea what I had to do. I was in shock and dismay at this happening.

As my ex-husband had chosen to represent himself, he was allowed to cross-examine me on the witness stand. I believe that this day on the stand was possibly the most traumatic day that I have ever been through. He attempted to bribe me in the court room by saying to the judge "I will be prepared to negotiate for custody of the children, if my wife drops the rape charges".

I was exhausted and suffering from extreme anxiety and negotiated for custody on the second day of the trial. I was not able to cross-examine him, the witnesses I had called were sent home and the court reporter and psychiatrist were not called up. At the end of the two days, my ex-husband demanded that I pay for his court costs.

My ex-husband has shown truly disturbing behaviour in most court appearances. He took out two AVO applications against my new partner with the children listed. This was his attempt at both trying to get custody of the two youngest children again and to break up my relationship. During one of these appearances in [REDACTED] court in [REDACTED], my ex-husband stood up in a sitting court room and verbally abused both myself and my partner. After speaking with the police that day, we tried to put this incident behind us. A week later, I received a call from [REDACTED] police asking us to attend the

police station. My partner and myself we placed under arrest, interviewed and hand our fingerprints and mug shots taken. This was both extremely stressful and humiliating for both of us.

My ex-husband has attempted to have us arrested again on several occasions. I cannot even count how many times he has ordered police to attend our house for welfare checks on the children. The police have always found the children to be well-cared for and the house tidy and clean. He has accused myself and my partner of abusing my sons and for having a derelict home. This has never been the case but I find myself being hyper-alert all the time. He has also reported me on multiple occasions to Child Protection Services, having us subjected to home visits and investigations. As my sons are happy, loved and well-cared for, these investigations have been a waste of CPS's valuable time and effort.

During most of the court appearances, my ex-husband creates a very hostile environment. He calls for police to attend, yells at the judge and our lawyers, calling for DHS and court support. During one appearance in [REDACTED] I overheard him shouting to our lawyer in the hallway that he would "be here every day or every week until I get what I want!" He sits and glares at us as we wait to appear in court, intimidating and scaring us both. I now go to court by myself as my partner is worried that my ex-husband will attempt to have him arrested again.

Once the one-year AVO had expired in [REDACTED], I attended court and was granted an extension of the AVO for two years. Incredibly and disturbingly, due to a mistake made by [REDACTED] court, my ex-husband was able to have this AVO revoked in [REDACTED] without me being notified that he had applied for a revoke order. The court was not able to re-instate the order and I had to begin the process again. Once the [REDACTED] court had recognised the mistake made it was granted again for the two-year period. During this period of not having the AVO in place, I was put under extreme stress and anxiety finding myself being hyper-vigilant, always expecting him to show up to my house and kill me. I couldn't leave the home during this period without my partner.

During change over times for his custody visits I was subjected to verbal and mental abuse from my ex-husband every single time. These change-overs took place in [REDACTED] Police station but that didn't prevent me from suffering this abuse at his hands. In [REDACTED], he refused to let the children come to me to return home and verbally abused me. He went on to abuse two police officers and this was captured on CCTV. He has been charged with breaching the AVO and this goes to court next month.

To prevent the abuse at change-overs it was decided that my ex-husband should collect the children directly from school every second Friday and drop them off the following Monday. Both my partner and myself objected to this strongly as I didn't want to school staff to be subjected to any abuse. Also, the children's school is only [REDACTED] away from my home, allowing my ex-husband to come very close to our address.

This arrangement worked for a few months until [REDACTED] when he got the weekend dates mixed up. He would not collect the children on his set weekends and then attempt to collect them on my allocated weekends. This was when the verbal abuse started to be aimed at the school's principal and office staff, with him yelling, swearing and slamming doors in the school lobby. This extreme abuse both in person and over the phone resulted in the school from placing a non-trespass order against him. Despite this, he still continues to verbally assault the school principal over the phone every fortnight.

On [REDACTED] I had to make the difficult decision to keep my two youngest son's away from their father. His behaviour had escalated to the point where I am now in fear not only for my

own safety but for the safety of my children. They had reported instances of verbal and mental abuse during their weekend visits with their father. My [REDACTED] son would cry on the days that he knew he had to go to his father's home. They would both be extremely distressed when they were returned to school, both suffering from depression and anxiety from their father's abhorrent behaviour. I am now in the position of suffering the consequences of keeping my children safe though the court process.

My ex-husband continues to use Third Parties to harass me despite the AVO stating that this was not allowed. He regularly contacts the police, DHS, CPS, child support and Centrelink. He has also attempted to have our family dog destroyed through the RSPCA and the local council as he was angry for me getting a new dog without his permission. Our dog was adopted through a respected dog rescue group and was thoroughly tested before we adopted him. This caused extreme distress to both myself and my children at the thought of their much-loved pet being destroyed.

He is now trying to have us removed from our home by not following the correct process by the bank with the mortgage that I have been paying since [REDACTED]. He has stopped paying his own mortgage to create a default order against my home, despite me paying the mortgage on my own. He sends threatening letters to my lawyer and continues to send me text messages every week.

My ex-husband is a very intelligent man and uses the court system to his full advantage. It is exhausting, expensive and stressful for all involved being taken to court so often. The court network needs to look at these vengeful people who use the court to re-victimize parent and prevent this from happening.

I know that there is nothing that can be done with preventing me from being taken to court by my ex-husband and that this will continue on for me for many, many years to come. I hope that in the future the system will change to protect venerable people such as myself and to look at the overall picture of past abuse to determine what is really in the best interest of anyone involved.

Thank you for taking the time to read my (long) story.