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To the Sentencing Council of NSW,

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a volunteer at The Blue Butterfly Institute who are a not-for-profit charity, based in NSW, volunteer run and lead, to support victim survivors of sexual trauma.

In 1994 my gymnastics coach of twelve years (who was also my supervising employer) was charged by three victims with child sexual abuse. The case took 18 months to prepare before the court proceeding took place in 1996. During this time the victims suffered the added trauma of having to relive their experiences of horrific abuse by a man who held a position of high power within two large institutions. The impact of that alone was immeasurable.

During the court proceedings the victims all took the stand under extremely difficult conditions, but were brave and strong through hours and days of broken tears and painful suffering. They wanted the justice they so truly deserved.

I sat in that courtroom every day throughout those proceedings holding my own secrets of long term, severe sexual abuse by that same man. The abuse began when I was twelve years old and didn't end until his arrest thirteen years later. I did not have the courage or strength to stand alongside those survivors at that time, but hoped in some small way that being there would support these girls I had known for so many years. It was also an opportunity for me to gain some understanding of how the court system worked for these victims so that I had more knowledge for when I was ready to bring my own charges.

After their days long testimonies, his defence brought forward character references from people within the two empowered institutions he was working under, to give credibility to him as "a pillar of society" and as such, heartbreak to those victims and to those of us there to see justice prevail. To hear words of glory spoken about a monster who we knew as an evil child molester was completely devastating. The impact of those references will never be erased or forgotten and I wholeheartedly believe, resulted in a very light sentencing even after he was given two guilty verdicts on two of the young girls. The charges of the third victim were dismissed which I believe was also impacted by those referees testimonies and letters.

As I sat there hearing his sentence of short term community service, I knew then I would keep my secrets. To hear people stand up for someone who had used his position of power to abuse me, hurt me, shame and destroy me was the final realisation I needed that I could never stand up and speak my truth. I decided right there and then I would carry my suffering to my grave. The people who gave the references were people I looked up to in our industry, and they could not be more wrong about his character. It broke me and I have suffered in silence ever since. I am now 56 years old and the impact has been years of hospitalisations, long term financially straining therapy, a severe eating disorder, anxiety, depression and more trauma symptoms than I can even put into words.



Not surprisingly to me, this monster went on to be charged many times by other victims throughout the next 25 years. He was found guilty many times, and finally sentenced to gaol time on all of those occasions. The referees who were wholly in his corner at the first proceedings, withdrew their support of him, but sadly the damage for those first victims, and myself, was already done. They never got the justice they deserved and I never found the trust in the system that would have given me the courage to face him myself. All because of those words of praise that were allowed to be presented in front of young, terrified and innocent young ladies. Heartbreaking, demeaning and untrue words of good character for a monster.

I am writing this to implore the system to look at the impact of character references in sexual trauma proceedings. Sexual predators hide in plain sight. They ensure they present themselves in the best light to those around them. It's the best way to ensure their victims stay quiet and compliant. Of course their "character" looks outwardly impeccable. If they showed their true colours of the despicable, soulless and disgusting excuses of human beings they truly are to the world, they would never get the secretive, hidden, isolating access they need to their prey. Character references hurt the victims in ways that can never be truly understood, until you've experienced that impact yourself. I hope that by writing this, and opening up old wounds that will now have to be managed, I can have a voice and help to bring change for the survivors of such horrific offences.

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