

August 23, 2019

Dear Hope & Home Board Member,

I submit this letter to you in the strictest confidentiality, and under the counsel of my pastor, in addition to having consulted with an employment attorney. This letter is written with much sadness and trepidation. After much consideration, it is being thoughtfully submitted via certified mail to Board Chairman Keith Cross, and Board Members Bob Lanting, Justin Ball, and Marla Brown.

On August 7, I officially submitted my resignation as Director of Finance at Hope & Home to Ross Wright and Jess Engel. Due to the fact that I informed Ross on July 10 that I was seeking other employment, I felt that 2 weeks notice was more than sufficient. I would like to make clear that my reason for leaving Hope & Home is not because I was recruited to a better position. My sole reason for leaving Hope & Home is the poor character and integrity of Hope & Home's Executive Director, Ross Wright, and that I am unwilling to work with and for such a person.

I care deeply for Hope & Home, and strongly support Hope & Home's mission to care for and love abused and neglected children. I highly value the friendships that I have made with other staff members, both past and present. It has been an honor to serve the amazing foster parents who pour themselves out for the lives of these foster children. Because of these things, I am compelled to not remain silent in light of the behavior and character I have witnessed from Ross. As a member of the Senior Management upon the drafting of this letter, I feel a responsibility to advocate for the women on staff at Hope & Home who have suffered and sacrificed under his leadership to make Hope & Home the amazing organization that it is today.

Other than Management, Hope & Home is staffed almost solely by relatively young females, often with little to no previous professional work experience. I have had 2 former staff members confide in me that Ross has been inappropriate with them, including infatuation, disregard for personal space, unwanted touch, asking them out on dates, late night calls and texts, and asking for pictures of them. I believe that he intentionally grooms women based on his personal knowledge of their backgrounds. One such employee has these text messages saved as evidence which she is willing to provide. Through these former employees, I'm also aware that there are approximately close to a dozen other former employees who have similar stories. Most have been intimidated into silence, or feel that reporting their experience is not worth the emotional, psychological, and mental strain.

I was aware of disconcerting behavior from Ross for years, but was not aware of the details of others' experiences until recently. I have personally experienced his disregard for personal space, inappropriate jokes and talk about women on staff, derogatory comments about former staff members, as well as his use of abuser language. [REDACTED] as the above issues came to light, and in addition to my personal experiences, I decided that I could no longer work with Ross. He has created a work environment in which he uses flattery, offers of promotions and raises, intimidation, and even veiled threats to control and maintain the silence of his victims.

Senior Management has consisted of Ross Wright, Jacque Thurman, and myself for the past 3 years. Ross and Jacque have been in a romantic relationship since at least late 2016 to my knowledge, though the relationship was only recently disclosed to the Board. Reports of Ross' behavior which have gone to Jacque, as the Deputy and Clinical Director, have been blatantly ignored. Ross is very protective of the Board, and has a way of making clear that no employee should ever report anything negative about him to them. Thus, the staff is left with no recourse.

The following are behaviors I have directly witnessed from Ross, or that has been reported to me by other employees.

- Derogatory and degrading talk about former employees who have left in otherwise good standing
- Repeatedly joking about how employees at the Garden of the Gods Club probably wonder what he does for a living since he only goes to the Club with rich old men and beautiful young women, and being amused by the insinuation that he is running a sex trafficking ring
- Having one-on-one conversations with staff members in which he rambles incessantly about things of a sexual nature
- Intimidating staff, and manipulating the Board to eliminate an honest evaluation of his performance
- Threatening former employees with negative references, and threatening current employees with firing for not maintaining strict loyalty to himself
- Blatantly lying to the Board at board meetings, lying to prospective foster parents at Launches, and regularly putting a positive spin on information that would otherwise reflect poorly upon him
- Interrogating current staff members regarding the influence former employees may have over them
- Delaying significant actions, such as repairing the elevator, despite Hope & Home having a significant amount of unutilized funds sitting in the bank
- Pursuing additional funding through grants and individual donations despite not utilizing the excess funds currently on hand
- Taking advantage of longtime, faithful employees by refusing fair compensation, despite being provided with salary analyses that show many Hope & Home employees are paid below the state average for non-profits, despite his own salary being at the median level
- Bragging about and elevating nepotism as the way of Hope & Home to the management team

If you require details about the above instances, I and the former employees listed below, are willing to provide such.

An Executive Director's values, beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors set the tone for the culture of an organization. I refuse to work in an organization where an unprofessional culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation by the Executive Director reigns. Unfortunately, despite my leaving in good standing and doing my best to make the transition smooth, there was an underlying current of hostility toward recent former employees and myself that I believe has its source in Ross. As a result, on Wednesday, August 21, I could no longer maintain friendly pretenses or face a meeting with Ross. Thus, I ended my employment a day earlier than intended.

I wish Ross no ill will in writing this letter, but believe that Ross' leadership is detrimental to the staff and to the success of the organization. My motive is to prevent the cycle of abuse from continuing amongst a staff of hard working women who are truly dedicated to the success of the mission of Hope & Home. As members of the Board, entrusted with the ethical integrity of Hope & Home, I urge you to call Ross to accountability, to investigate these matters, and take action to protect the very people who are the "boots on the ground" of Hope & Home.

The following former employees have read this letter and agreed for their names to appear here so that they may be contacted to relate their personal experiences.

former employees listed

Of the 5 former employees listed here, one was interviewed for the Employer's Council investigation, and details of her experience were included in other's statements provided to EEOC.

Sincerely,

Wendy Neal [REDACTED]  
Accounting Assistant, Director of Finance 8/5/2014 - 8/21/2019