

San Diego Charity, Executive Named in Sexual Harassment and Assault Lawsuit



Jay Bowser, far right, speaks at a panel discussion in 2019 alongside other local leaders at Bayview Baptist Church in Encanto. A new lawsuit accuses Bowser and his nonprofit Paving Great Futures of sexual harassment and abuse. (Andrea Lopez-Villafaña / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Paving Great Futures, the decade-old nonprofit dedicated to empowerment and advancement, is accused of abusing an employee who was recovering from addiction

BY [JEFF MCDONALD](#)

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Kelly Torstrom was trying to leave behind decades of sex work and recover from addiction when she began volunteering at Paving Great Futures, the San Diego charity dedicated to serving vulnerable people through empowerment, job training, entrepreneurship and more.

The volunteer effort turned into a full-time job — Torstrom’s first ever — and by 2019 she was on her way to a more fulfilling life.

But according to a San Diego Superior Court lawsuit filed late last month, Torstrom’s job at [Paving Great Futures](#) turned into an unthinkable ordeal.

Within months of her joining the payroll, Torstrom’s boss, the charity co-founder and chief executive Jay Bowser, began sexually harassing her, showing up at her house with alcohol and drugs and sexually assaulting her again and again, the lawsuit alleges.

“This was a repeated pattern of Bowser knowing that plaintiff was at high risk for relapse, but would offer her and encourage her to partake in using drugs when he would ‘check on’ her,” San Diego employment law attorney Joshua Gruenberg wrote in the complaint.

“This was also a repeated pattern of Bowser pressuring and forcing plaintiff to perform sexual acts with him, against her will and desires,” he added.

The 28-page legal complaint outlines a years-long practice of harassment and abuse against Torstrom committed by Bowser and others at the charity. It only ended earlier this year, when she left the organization.

Paving Great Futures was set up a decade ago [to protect](#) some of the most vulnerable people in San Diego, and regularly receives funding from local government agencies.

Neither Bowser nor other executives at the organization responded to multiple requests for comment on the allegations last week. The law firm defending the nonprofit entity also declined to discuss the claims.

“We cannot comment on pending litigation,” defense attorney Skye Resendes said by email.

Paving Great Futures operates out of the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, the southeast San Diego community hub that hosts many nonprofit organizations and community events. It also keeps a mailing address in Mission Valley.

According to records on file at the state Attorney General's Office, which regulates tax-exempt organizations in California, Paving Great Futures was established in 2013 to promote economic self-sufficiency through employment or self-employment.

Its three co-founders are Barry Harris Jr., Armand King and Bowser. The men were the only board members for years, federal tax filings show, but in the year that ended July 31, 2021, they reported salaries of \$71,500 for each of the co-founders and also added several new directors.

Paving Great Futures reported annual revenue of \$967,000 that year, almost all of it from contributions and grants, the most recently filed federal tax return showed. It also reported total assets of \$374,000.

In just over 10 years, the San Diego nonprofit has grown into a politically influential charity whose leaders are well known among local government leaders.

In addition to collecting more than \$280,000 in government grants in the most recent fiscal year, Paving Great Futures has also received financial support from several [high-profile philanthropies](#).

The co-founders also have been invited to serve on local government [advisory boards](#) and to present community discussions on issues like [sex trafficking](#) and [entrepreneurship](#).

According to [his profile](#) on the LinkedIn social media website, Harris is an executive at a San Diego insurance company who holds an MBA from Howard University.

King is [a self-declared former pimp](#) who served time in state prison and has since served on multiple San Diego city boards. He has consulted with political and law enforcement agencies on gangs and sex trafficking, [a 2021 profile](#) in The San Diego Union-Tribune noted.

Bowser has worked as a financial-services professional and promotes himself as a public speaker on leadership and strategic planning, according to [his LinkedIn profile](#).

The June 23 lawsuit asserts that Torstrom knew King in high school. After reconnecting with King around 2019, she told him she wanted to quit drugs and sex work. She started at Paving Great Futures as a volunteer and was later hired as an office assistant.

Torstrom and King began dating, Gruenberg said in the legal complaint. At one point, when King was out of town, Bowser invited her to play pool outside work.

“Given that plaintiff was still relatively new to PGF, and given that Bowser was PGF’s CEO, plaintiff did not want to be perceived as unfriendly or uninterested in any support that Bowser was willing to provide,” Gruenberg wrote. “Plaintiff did not want to risk her new role with PGF.”

But the evening turned dark after Bowser took Torstrom to a hotel room, where Bowser pressured her to engage in sexual activity, the lawsuit asserts. The behavior escalated, and Bowser later had sex with Torstrom against her will on multiple occasions, the suit adds.

Torstrom felt powerless to resist or stop the assaults, Gruenberg said.

“As a former sex worker who was routinely abused and exposed to the abuse of other workers, and as a former addict, plaintiff was in a susceptible position,” he wrote. “Bowser exploited her weakness under the guise of pretending to be her friend and mentor.”

The abuse was not limited to Bowser’s assaults, the lawsuit states. Torstrom was sexually harassed by others inside the Paving Great Futures office, and senior leaders did nothing when the abuse was reported, it adds.

At least one woman working at the charity also was harassed by other Paving Great Futures employees, the lawsuit alleges.

“This other employee made a complaint to Bowser, however Bowser did not want to deal with it,” Gruenberg wrote.

“Plaintiff has been subjected to repeated sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual battery at the hands of Bowser and others at PGF,” he added. “Plaintiff has objected to this conduct on numerous occasions with no change or corrective action.”

In addition to sexual harassment, the lawsuit accuses Paving Great Futures of gender discrimination, retaliation, negligent supervision and intentional infliction of emotional distress. The claim also accuses Bowser of sexual battery and assault.

The case has been assigned to Judge James Mangione. A case management conference has been scheduled for early next year.