'DANCING MAN'

Sean O'Brien, shamed by online bullies, has the last laugh



For Sean O'Brien, it was just an ordinary night out with friends. The forty-seven-year-old head of finance for a chain of hotels knew that people sometimes mocked him for being overweight, and he was usually able to shrug it off. But this time, as well as laughing at him in person, someone decided to publicly fat-shame him by posting a video of him dancing online, with a hurtful comment. Sean was completely unaware of it, but the post about him was shared widely, and it prompted a wave of abuse from immature Internet trolls.

However, as well as the cyberbullies, other people were watching. A group of women in California, who were campaigning to encourage people to have a positive body image whatever their size, decided to take action. They put out a message on Twitter, inviting Sean on an all-expenses paid trip from London to Los Angeles, to meet and dance with them. There was just one problem: they had no idea who he was! They started a hashtag #FindDancingMan.

When Sean's friends first told him about the search for 'dancing man', he figured it was a bit of nonsense which would soon blow over, and decided not to bother doing anything about it. But the movement got bigger and bigger, and was soon joined by celebrities such as Ellie Goulding and Pharrell Williams. So, Sean rethought his decision, made contact, and the women – all 1,700 of them – started raising money to throw him an extra-special party in LA. In just a few days, they had raised $40,000, both for the trip and to support a number of anti-bullying charities, and Sean was on his way.

First stop was New York, where he appeared on the Today show, dancing with the singer-songwriter, Meghan Trainor, famous for her body positive anthem, '*All About That Bass*'. Then it was off to the party in California. Sean had assumed that just a few people would turn up, but he realised his mistake as soon as he saw over 1,000 people queuing to get into the nightclub! The event was deejayed by the multitalented musician, record producer, singer, songwriter and photographer, Moby, and guests included a number of other celebrities. Sean danced all night and the story of how he and the women's group in California took a stance against cyberbullying was reported around the world.

As a result of the event, some of the women set up *Dance Free Movement*, an online forum where anyone who felt they had been bullied or victimised could receive support. The 'dancing man' himself has become a fundraiser for several anti-bullying charities.

Sean commented in an interview at the time that he was amazed that something which started out so badly had become such a positive movement. He said that he had actually never really thought about the people who posted the original images, concluding that they must have their own insecurities to put the spotlight on someone else so maliciously. Sean certainly had the last laugh.

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We will probably never know exactly why they decided to try and publicly humiliate Sean, but unfortunately, it is certainly the case that the Internet is full of such bullies. A recent UK survey discovered that forty-two percent of people under twenty-five had felt unsafe online and fifty-six percent said they had witnessed online bullying. In the UK at least, cyberbullying itself is not illegal, but sending 'malicious communications' for the purpose of causing anxiety or distress is punishable by up to six months in prison. Unless the bully is known to the victim, however, it can be almost impossible to find them and enforce the law, as they usually hide behind fake profiles.

However, in this particular case, the bullies completely misjudged the impact their actions would have in the end. We are often told that the best idea is not to give bullies any attention, but it may be that the best way to deal with cyberbullying is to act as these women did and be brave enough to make it clear that we are uncomfortable with this kind of behaviour, that we disagree with what is being said and that bullying is completely unacceptable.

GLOSSARY

anxiety – an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something

blow over – If an argument or unpleasant situation blows over, it ends or is forgotten.

distress – a feeling of extreme worry, sadness, or pain

insecurity – a feeling of lacking confi dence and not being sure of your own abilities

wave of abuse – a sudden increase in cruel or violent treatment of someone

Match the highlighted words and phrases from the news story with their definitions.

mocked	1. To make somebody feel bad about their weight.
shrug it off	2. In a way which is intended to hurt someone.
fat-shame	3. To treat something as unimportant and not worry about it.
took a stance against	4. To finally be successful after other people have criticised you.
maliciously	5. To laugh at someone and try to make them look stupid by saying unkind things about them.
had the last laugh	6. To stand up for what you believe.
humiliate	7. To make someone feel ashamed or stupid, especially when other people are present.

Quizlet



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