

TW/CW: SA

I worked at the Middle East for almost three years. My first position was as a door person and I ended up becoming one of the club's talent buyers, my "on-paper" dream job, after 1.5 years of working there. About one year into my new position, one of the owners of the club was accused of sexual assault. It is not my place to say anything about the assault or who was involved, but I wanted to address the public with some more information about my position at the Middle East during this time and apologize to the victims and the public for staying silent for so long. I realize that I have been complicit in my silence and wanted to detail and share my experience.

In the weeks/months following the assault allegation, I was one of the few people who would spend every day of the week at the club, working with other employees internally to try to rectify this awful situation. I felt heard there. Myself and others organized multiple town-hall style meetings where we came up with a list of problematic things we wanted to see changed at the Middle East. We pushed to get a public statement made from the ownership/management in order to address the accusation, for staff & management sexual harassment training, to put up signs in the bathrooms and around the club urging attendees to alert security or staff if they have been made uncomfortable or felt like they were uncomfortable or in any danger, for putting new workplace protocol in place which included adding a Human Resources position to the company, and most importantly, for the accused owner to be removed from the premises. There was a glimpse of hope when the accused took an indefinite leave of absence, so that the changes the club employees were rallying for could come to fruition.

At that point, I saw no immediate danger being posed by someone coming to the venue, so I continued to book shows with the wishful thinking that things were getting better. With the narrative that there was potential for real and lasting change taking place and also being assured that my voice was being heard loud and clear because of the value I brought to the club by booking shows, I continued to do my job. I told everyone that things at the Middle East were going to be OK in the end because I genuinely believed in the work we were doing. I was under the impression that the club was going to address what happened retroactively and also put in place preventative measures to ensure that something like this would never happen again on the premises. I was wrong to have gone along with the company as long as I did, but with the hopeful facade of them taking the situation seriously, I stayed.

We were repeatedly being fed a false hope that things would get better and that this situation would be taken care of by higher-ups at the club, but after a few months it became clear that all of our issues and plans to resolve them was no longer a priority. To this day, a Human Resources person still hasn't been put in place and the safety signage was put up but then immediately taken down because upper management thought it made the Middle East "look guilty." While the accused was still on his leave of absence, we were able to schedule two mandatory sexual harassment trainings for the entire staff with the help of the wonderful organization Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC). That alone proved to me that the vast

majority of the employees at the club were on the same page and wanted to make the establishment a safer space.

After a four month voluntary leave of absence, the accused owner returned to the premises under his own conditions. There were constraining measures to his return being floated around during the proceeding time, but no one expected him to come back and there was no concrete plan set in place for his return. Unfortunately, the employees didn't have a say in once he did come back. While still working with BARCC (and the majority of the venue staff being on the same page), I continued to work at the Middle East until BARCC cut ties with the venue. With the accused being back on the premises and no concrete measures or training being put in place around his return, BARCC naturally felt that their work was ineffective. When that happened, it became evident that the Middle East was not willing to commit to the hard work and dedication it takes to change a toxic culture. The narrative being fed to us was nothing more than an act. Therefore, myself and other employees had finally seen enough and quit.

I was in a toxic relationship with the Middle East. I love my coworkers and I made some incredible life-long friends while working there and it truly did feel like a one huge wild family despite of the toxic work environment. It was my only source of income and my first "big kid job." My work gave me a sense of purpose, and it was all I wanted to do until I finally snapped out of it and realized that my "dream job" was just a toxic use of my time, energy and capacity.

Working at the Middle East took a toll on my mental health and well-being that I was totally unaware of at the time. Being removed from the venue, I now realize how I could have handled my job, my situation, and my position of power differently to be an advocate for those affected by sexual harassment and assault. In the middle of this storm, I now know that I was shortsighted as I tried to remedy what was directly in front of me without thinking about how my actions were affecting others and could be perceived in the long-term. Through my silence and continued work of booking bands at the Middle East, I failed at ensuring that artists and patrons were having a fully transparent idea of what they were walking into. This cannot be remedied by a statement months after the fact, but I finally have the mental capacity and time to process the this situation and think about what I can do in the future to be a voice for those who do not have the same privileges as me. I know that this won't fix some of the damages that i have done, but I am trying with all of me to do right for the music community by being receptive to criticism and by growing as a person.

I hope this sheds some light on the situation for those who I have not had a chance to talk to in person.

- Alex Pickert