

Past colleagues stand with Deborah Dugan against bullying claims by Recording Academy

 [latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-01-25/past-colleagues-stand-with-deborah-dugan-against-](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-01-25/past-colleagues-stand-with-deborah-dugan-against-)

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When Charles Gibb read that Recording Academy President and Chief Executive Deborah Dugan was placed on leave for creating a “toxic and intolerable” workplace, he was taken aback. Not because the accusations were so shocking — though they were — but because they were so far from the Dugan he knows well.

“She’s one of the most compassionate and selfless people I’ve ever met,” said Gibb, formerly the CEO of Belvedere and who worked with Dugan when she was chief executive at Red, the nonprofit AIDS-advocacy group founded by U2’s Bono.

“She cares deeply about people; she cares passionately about humanity and making the world a better place. She’s got extraordinary moral courage, and having that depth of moral courage makes her a very unique human being. Frankly, it’s simply unfathomable that Deb would behave the way people are reporting.”

Dugan took over Aug. 1 as the first female president of the Recording Academy, replacing Neil Portnow, who held the position for 17 years. She was ousted — just 10 days before the academy presents the 62nd Grammy Awards at Staples Center on Sunday — in response to a complaint of misconduct filed by “a senior member of the Recording Academy team.”

A leaked memo from board Chairman Harvey Mason Jr. said the employee’s complaint contained “serious allegations of a ‘toxic and intolerable’ and ‘abusive and bullying’ environment created by Ms. Dugan towards the staff.”

Dugan’s former boss Steven Murphy, who recruited Dugan to EMI and Disney Publishing, can’t connect such a characterization to his longtime colleague. “What makes her special is not that she’s successful, but *how* she’s successful,” he said.

“Deborah is admired, liked and, most importantly, trusted by recording artists in particular — who, as a cohort, probably have better radar than anyone to know who they can trust. You can’t fool them. She has earned that trust over the years because of her empathy, and her understanding of the artist’s needs and ambitions.

“That applies as much to colleagues and employees,” he continued. “When she asks, ‘How are you doing?’ she actually wants to know the answer and remembers the answer two weeks later. When she wakes up in the morning, it’s in her DNA to want everyone else to

have a good day. And far from being a bully, if she observed bullying on our team, she was fierce in her defense.”

Tom Freston, the board chair of the One Campaign, worked with Dugan for eight years on multiple campaigns with such brands as Apple, Starbucks and Coca-Cola. “I was always impressed by her energy and her ability to deliver results,” he told The Times in an email. “She did this for years with tremendous results, generating hundreds of millions of dollars for the Global Fund as well as helping keep the issue of HIV/AIDS alive.”

Veteran music executive Jay Landers, who has known Dugan for 30 years, also exalted her particular capacity for empathy from when he worked with her at EMI Records.

“It was a particularly tumultuous time in the history of the label because it seemed it was always on the verge of being sold or downsized, and there were rumors every day that some conglomerate was going to take over the company,” he recalled.

“Everybody, from assistants to senior executives, were wondering what their fate might be at any moment in terms of employment. When a staff is anxious about all of that, it can be challenging to keep people motivated to go forward with business as usual.”

But, Landers said, Dugan was able to do so by having one-on-one conversations with anyone who needed a sympathetic ear. “As much as she was attuned to the business side of the label, she was very attuned to the emotional health of the staff,” he said. “Her door was always open. She was one of the most supportive colleagues that I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. She was beloved by everyone she came in contact with.”

The complaint questioning Dugan’s professional behavior was filed by Claudine Little, the academy’s director of administration who had worked for nearly two decades under Portnow. It was made public amid Dugan’s denouncement of the Recording Academy concerning sexual harassment and gender discrimination, including an allegation she claims was known to the academy’s board of trustees that Portnow raped an unidentified “foreign” female recording artist. (Portnow has denied the allegation.)

Debra Alberts, who was Dugan’s former assistant at Disney for eight years, said she read the report of Dugan’s bullying and immediately thought, “This is such crap, it’s outrageous and totally bogus. I laughed, actually, because it couldn’t be further from the truth,” she said. “Deborah is forthright and fair, and if something isn’t right, she’s gonna bring it up and do what she can to make it right.”

Alberts also speculated of the Recording Academy, “They’re trying to cover up something. Maybe [Dugan] stumbled across something in her first few months and brought it to someone’s attention, it didn’t sit right and they thought, ‘She’s a troublemaker and we have to get her out of here.’ Something else has to be going on, and they’re trying to do a bit of mudslinging to discredit her.”

Ellis Wright, who was Dugan's longtime assistant throughout her years at EMI and Disney, said he "considered the source of where this [report of Dugan's behavior] is coming from," and even though it's "so high school," it made sense to him.

"I'm really not surprised to hear what she saw and what she's come forward with," he said of Dugan's accusations about the Recording Academy. "She and I never had a conversation about this, but this is something the industry always has felt for years. No one will say anything. She did."