

## PROFILE

# The survivor

Canada Border Services enforcement officer Lucija Bojcic supports PTSD survivors through art and advocacy.

BY TALIA WOODRIDGE

ON AUGUST 3, 2012, LUCIJA BOJCIC, AN INLAND Enforcement Officer with Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), boarded a commercial airline with a new colleague to escort a violent criminal deportee back to the Caribbean. That day, Bojcic was instructed by her supervisors to fly right into Hurricane Ernesto. Only one of five managers responded to her rattled email about the trip: “Thanks, Lucy. Fingers crossed!”

Bojcic felt trapped. “If I refused an assignment, I would be up against a lot of punitive action, as advocating for yourself is considered bad behaviour,” Bojcic says of the agency. “Worse, I would have to return and face the chiefs who ordered us to proceed to save a few hundred dollars in ticket fees and detention costs for the deportee.”

By the time their plane landed, conditions were so perilous that all connecting flights had been suspended. The trio waited for six hours in a cramped, over-air-conditioned airport with only stale vending machine candy for sustenance. After the deportee was collected, Bojcic and her colleague faced another hellish 72 hours of delayed flights, lost luggage, no money, and an overnight stay at a desolate, abandoned airport hotel with bed bugs.

“A diplomat in an oppressive country faces less stress—they at least have some support from their home country,” she says.

After arriving home at 10 p.m. the next day, she was expected to report to the office at 9 a.m.

After that ordeal, Bojcic could not stop crying at her desk for weeks. Fortunately, a compassionate colleague in the Employee Assistance Program explained to Bojcic she had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was eligible for Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB) compensation. In January 2013, Bojcic received the first WSIB claim for stress-induced injury by a CBSA officer.

But the Hurricane Ernesto incident wasn't the only time Bojcic felt unimaginable pressure at work. During her seven years at the agency, she had endured a persistent culture of overwork. “We had to be available 24/7 for an escort with no support from management,” she says. “To receive permission to get time off on weekends was near impossible.”

Her time away from work was not respected, she says. “When I was on leave, my manager would bring top-secret documents to my house, [saying they were] ‘cleaning out my desk.’”

And Bojcic knew it wasn't just affecting her. She noticed colleagues disappearing for weeks at a time or splurging on big-ticket purchases like sports cars—all symptoms of PTSD. The condition is common among those who work in law enforcement. Reports since 2015 cite an increase in the numbers of frontline PTSD claims coming forward in the RCMP, correctional facilities and regional police forces. (There is very little data on CBSA employees specifically.) Canada's first national survey, looking at operational stress injuries among first responders, conducted between 2016 and 2017, reported that out of 5,813 participants, 44.5 percent “screened positive for clinically significant symptom clusters consistent with one or more mental disorders.” This is alarmingly high in relation to the rate Statistics Canada gives for the general population: 10 percent.

By 2015, Bojcic's PTSD manifested physically in rheumatoid arthritis, causing her organs to shut down and her lungs to fill with fluid. She eventually rebounded, founding PTSD Alchemy in 2017, a social media resource for those living with PTSD.

“PTSD Alchemy is the culmination of all my [life] lessons,” says Bojcic, who spent her years pre-CBSA researching how people survive trauma, specifically in war-torn countries.

Bojcic has a committed following, and she receives thank you messages from around the world. “If I can help people realize they are not alone it helps me make peace with everything that I survived,” says Bojcic.

In 2018, Bojcic co-curated “It's All In Your Head,” an immersive exhibition exploring brain-body connections, to showcase her prints, paintings, wall-sized ink drawings, and hands-on interactive installations.

“Adult men came to me in tears telling me that the work really moved them. It helped me understand how much people suffer in silence,” says Bojcic. “I need to be the example that people will get better with PTSD.”

That same year, the Auditor General of Ontario contacted Bojcic for an investigation on workplace safety and well-being at the CBSA and the Correctional Services Facilities that will be tabled in Parliament in spring 2019.

“Hopefully something will finally be done to stop this,” she says. “It's a culture of ownership and everyone is desensitized to it.”