

EDUCATION

A UNC campus is accused of ignoring sex abuse. Records show little action after last scandal

BY SARA COELLO AND CARLI BROSEAU

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A lawsuit filed on Oct. 1, 2021 by Gloria Allred, Lisa Lanier and alumni of the UNC School of the Arts in Winston Salem, N.C., alleges rampant sexual abuse by faculty members throughout the school's history. BY [JULIA WALL](#)



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WINSTON-SALEM

As leaders at North Carolina's premier arts school decide how they'll respond to a wave of sex abuse allegations, some hear echoes of the past.

Alumni filing a lawsuit. Floods of similar accounts. Demands for accountability. All are familiar to those who recall accusations of sexual abuse at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in 1995.

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The core of its initial response — an independent investigation headed by powerful community leaders — reassured students and their parents that any predators on campus would be quickly found out.

But The Charlotte Observer and The News & Observer have uncovered evidence that leaders back then hid their most damning discoveries, granting accused predators continued access to vulnerable students.

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Previously unpublished documents, along with interviews with former members of the school community, reveal:

- Twenty-four staff members were accused of harassing or having relationships with students, according to a previously unpublished document.
- Of the 13 who were still working with the school in 1995, at least 12 stayed several years after the investigation; five are still listed on the school’s roster.
- Five accused faculty who agreed to interviews said they were never told of accusations against them or given a chance to defend themselves.

UNCSA remains one of the country’s top arts schools, and is the only U.S. institution to combine five conservatories — dance, design and production, drama, filmmaking and music — on a single campus in Winston-Salem. It enrolls high school and college students.

In the 26 years since the first lawsuit, the School of the Arts has bolstered its harassment policies and implemented one of the strictest student/faculty

relationship policies in the UNC system. Its leaders pledge to foster young artists in a healthy environment and empower them to fight abuse in their professions.

But critics — including former students and staff — say it's difficult to believe such promises from an institution with no public record of vigorously investigating allegations of predatory behavior aimed at students.

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'FAMILIAR HELL'

The latest lawsuit, filed by seven alumni who'd joined the high school dance program in the 1980s, describes a school where even respected staff didn't stop colleagues from abusing students.

Each of them describe teachers — Richard Kuch, Richard Gain, Duncan Noble or Melissa Hayden — sexualizing students in class, either demanding that they dance more provocatively or grabbing at their breasts, buttocks or groins.

Three students accused Kuch, Gain or Noble of singling them out for inappropriate sexual relationships, alleging that the teachers kept them late after class and spent time with them off-campus, taking few pains to hide their relationships from others on campus.

Sexual harassment and inappropriate relationships were common knowledge at the school, the plaintiffs said, such that any administrators who claimed not to know about it must have been turning “a willful blind eye.”

The lawsuit describes UNCSCA's campus as a “familiar hell” for students who concluded that the abuse was a standard price they had to pay for careers in the professional dance world.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT, ASSAULT ACCUSATIONS REVIVED

One of the current plaintiffs had already shared his experiences in a 1995 lawsuit, which brought widespread criticism upon UNCSCA.

Christopher Soderlund, who enrolled in the high school ballet program in 1983, was 15 when he arrived at the school's campus, tucked onto 78 acres of lush hillside near downtown Winston-Salem. He thrived in the dance studio, according to his lawsuits, until two teachers began grooming him for abuse.

Kuch and Gain characterized dance as a sexual expression, according to the lawsuit, telling students that sex would improve their performances. Sexual contact, they told boys, would “loosen them up,” the suit alleges.

By Easter of 1984, the teachers’ pursuit surged out of the dance studio, the lawsuit says. Gain took 16-year-old Soderlund to the Yadkin County farmhouse he shared with Kuch, plied him with alcohol and had sex with him, his lawsuit said. It was the first of several sexual assaults, according to the lawsuit, which Soderlund endured out of fear that his mentors would abandon him.

The abuse was common knowledge, Soderlund alleges, widely acknowledged by staff and used as bullying fodder by other students.

In a boys’ dormitory, other students drew graphic cartoons of Soderlund having sex with Kuch and Gain. When Soderlund told a resident assistant, the school cleaned the walls but didn’t acknowledge the graffiti’s implications, according to the lawsuit.

Soderlund said six teachers acknowledged that they knew of his relationship with Kuch and Gain but didn’t criticize the men or offer to help their 16-year-old student.

Two of them, Soderlund said in the lawsuit, indicated that school administrators knew of accusations against Kuch and Gain but wouldn’t act. They couldn’t help him.

As the school year came to a close, ballet dean Duncan Noble told Soderlund that he was aware of the sexual relationship and that he, too, would have had sex with the student, the lawsuits say. Then Noble, then the assistant dean of the ballet department, informed Soderlund that he wouldn’t be invited to finish his education in the fall.

Soderlund emphasized that the school had instilled in him a sense that such relationships were morally acceptable, so it took years for him to recognize it as abuse and decide to sue. But by then, the former student was older than 21, the age cutoff for child sexual abuse lawsuits at that time. Courts quickly dismissed his lawsuit.

Before the lawsuit failed, Kuch and Gain denied the allegations in a legal filing. But they resigned from the school before a disciplinary hearing that could’ve led to their firing, ending campus leaders’ usual path to investigate complaints against faculty.

The short-lived case had already sparked uproar, prompting University of North Carolina system leaders to create another route to investigate sexual abuse of students.

'LIMITED' INVESTIGATION

On Aug. 16, 1995, UNC Board of Governors chairman Sam Neill announced he would commission a study of UNCSA's culture to improve students' safety and reassure the public that UNCSA took the matter seriously.

The commission consisted of five citizens considered pillars of the community -- Valeria Lee, Betsy Cochrane, Stephen Karr, John McKinnon and John McNair -- along with staffers Cynthia Bonner and Nathan Simms.

In a letter to alumni and at two student convocations, the commission asked current and former students to call in any abuse reports. They were to dial a hotline that UNC administrators manned for 20 hours over 10 days, collecting callers' social security numbers to verify their identities and "determine whether it is necessary to arrange an appointment for a personal interview at a later date."

More than 50 people called to accuse staff from across the school's departments, 18 of them with firsthand accounts of faculty engaging in dating relationships with them or sexually harassing them.

The commission acknowledged their calls in a 16-page document that included no details of individual allegations. The document simultaneously dismissed the idea there was pervasive abuse at the school.

The document offered a series of potential reforms that leaders hoped would reassure critics, including forbidding faculty from dating their students, for example, and encouraging deans to assure students that they wouldn't face retaliation for reporting abuse.

But while planning documents indicate that the commission was originally tasked with referring some accusations to university officials or legal authorities, public records show no evidence they did so, beyond sharing the accused faculty's names with UNC President C.D. Spangler and UNCSA Chancellor Alex Ewing.

Most of the accused teachers were no longer employed at the school, the report stressed. School leaders repeated that point in letters to each other and interviews, emphasizing relative safety for current students.

But that wasn't true.

An unpublished document from the late Spangler's archives shows that 12 of the 24 accused were still teaching at the school. Another, Noble, had technically retired but signed perennial contracts to teach dance for a few more years. Five are still listed on the school's faculty roster, some in emeritus positions.

Neither UNCOSA nor the UNC system turned over this document after requests by the Charlotte Observer and the News & Observer for records related to the investigation. UNCOSA has no records indicating that administrators notified, investigated or disciplined any of the accused staff, Vice Chancellor of Institutional Integrity David Harrison said.

Five of the people who callers accused of either having inappropriate relationships with students or sexually harassing them, all of whom continued to work for the school years after the investigation, said in interviews that they'd never been told the commission had named them as suspects.

Lee, who headed the commission, said in an interview that she doesn't remember details of who took responsibility after her team submitted their findings to the Board of Governors in November 1995. She said she's also not sure she personally saw the document that names teachers — the staff summary includes a similar list, but groups complaints by department and time period rather than the names of the accused.

Many of the campus and UNC system records and statements to the press focus on the investigation's impact on the school's image, not further scrutiny.

Bill Davis, a Winston-Salem attorney who then chaired the school's Board of Trustees, complained in an October 1995 letter to Spangler and Ewing that UNC staff had publicly described "a pattern of sexual misbehavior" rather than deferring to the commission.

“I have a difficult time putting into words how disappointed I am,” Davis wrote in the letter, which is preserved in both Spangler and Ewing’s archives.

The commission acknowledged a problem but insisted it wasn’t widespread, writing both that “there appears to have been a high incidence over the years of what may be described as sexual harassment of students by employees” and that “there is no credible evidence that the school is now or in the past has been infected by an epidemic of sexual misconduct.”

The point on which everyone agreed was that the commission wasn’t equipped to capture or explain the extent of abuse at the school.

Members did interview an unspecified sampling of former students as well as former and then-current staff, its report noted. They acknowledged that some people would hesitate to come forward and emphasized that their ability to verify reports was “limited.”

“With respect to other situations involving offensive and unwelcome contacts, most former students we interviewed said they had been afraid to report a member of the arts faculty, in the belief that to do so could have jeopardized their status at the School as well as their professional careers,” the report reads. “Members of the arts faculty have unusual power to make basically subjective decisions about whether a student will be invited to return year to year.”

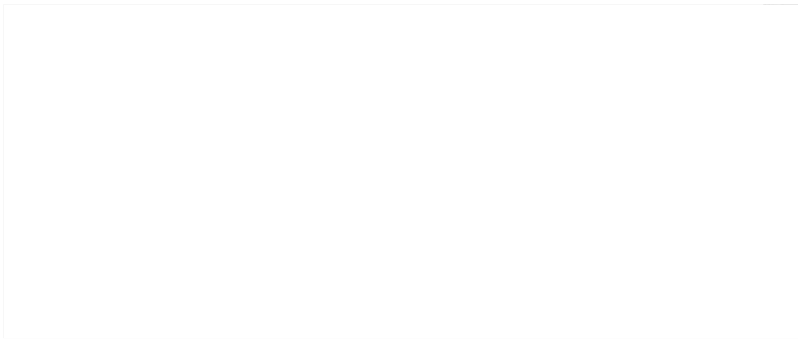
OTHER UNCOSA REPORTS

Lee was quoted in the Winston-Salem Journal in October 1995 saying that the commission likely didn’t have enough time to seek out abuse reports from people who hadn’t called the hotline. But allegations beyond those in Soderlund’s lawsuit were plentiful.

The Charlotte Observer and The News & Observer spoke to two dozen former students and staff who experienced, witnessed or knew rumors of faculty sexually harassing and abusing their charges. Most spoke on condition of anonymity, saying they were worried about retaliation from colleagues or the school. A handful of others have spoken out in books, newspapers and court records.

Their memories include sexual comments in class, students spending nights at teachers’ homes, and widespread acceptance among students that future careers could hinge on accepting professors’ advances.

Gyula Pandi, a longtime dance instructor who said he’d told Vice Chancellor William Pruitt the year before that Kuch and Gain’s reputation barred him from recruiting boys from across the country to the dance program, told The Charlotte Observer and The News and Observer Saturday that the commission didn’t interview him. He doesn’t remember even knowing that an investigation had happened.



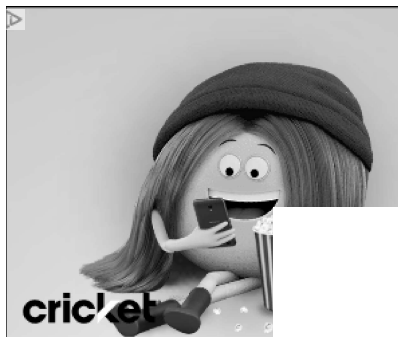
A former student, Kaylee Cahoon, said she had left the dance program in 1986 but still dwelled on memories from her time there: Kuch pursuing a classmate, Gain comparing her movements to a woman in labor, and her complaining to a school counselor to no avail. She wrote the Board of Governors in the mid-1990s, she said in a 2021 interview, detailing what she knew.

The school responded in a letter “that they were very sorry to hear that I perceived my experience in such a negative way and that most people who leave the school have such fond things to say, and they hoped over time that my perception of things would shift,” Cahoon said. “I threw it out, I was angry.”

Pruitt, who oversaw arts and academics beginning in 1990, said that in 1994 two teachers listed sexual abuse of student by faculty as one of their biggest concerns for the school, but didn’t give him enough information to act, according to the Winston-Salem Journal.

Ewing was quoted in the Winston-Salem Journal Aug. 13, 1995, saying that he’d “heard rumors, characterizations ... But never with an incident that was recent.”

A 1994 biography of Eddie Stierle, a ballet dancer who died of AIDS in 1991, said that as a 16-year-old UNCSCA student he’d had sex with an unnamed teacher.



In a 1995 letter to the Office of the Attorney General which was preserved in UNCSCA’s archives, Pruitt referenced a memo that showed Kuch “was subject to some inquiry” in 1983 about sexually harassing a student. Citing employee privacy laws, the school refused to turn over staff disciplinary files but Harrison said that they contained no further evidence that Kuch had been investigated or disciplined.

In 2005, Blair Tindall published the memoir that inspired the Amazon television series “Mozart in the Jungle.” As a high school oboe student at UNCSCA in the 1970s, Tindall wrote that two teachers touched her inappropriately and two more had sex with her. “Student-faculty sex hadn’t waned since 1970,” she wrote, when then President Robert Ward acknowledged “a small number of male faculty members” having sex with students.

One of the teachers she dated, who was 43 at the time, went on to garner two sexual harassment complaints in the 1995 Board of Governors investigation. He retired in

2002, and said UNC never informed him of the allegations.

“With his reputation as the campus Casanova, I knew he wouldn’t reject me,” Tindall wrote. But by her senior year she couldn’t overlook their age difference and the teacher’s higher libido, she said, and their “lovemaking almost felt like rape.”

#METOO

In December 2018, a new generation of allegations took root. Stephen Shipps, who’d taught violin at UNCSA in the 1980s but departed for the University of Michigan before the 1995 investigation that would gather eight accusations against him, had sparked a new wave of sex abuse allegations.

A UM student journalist published [allegations against Shipps dating back to 1978](#), including that of an anonymous former UNCSA student who said he’d locked her in his office and pinned her against a wall before trying to kiss her.

In October 2020, one set of allegations spawned a federal indictment. Authorities accused Shipps of taking a 16-year-old girl across state lines for sex in 2002. He’s awaiting trial on two federal counts of transporting a minor to engage in sexual activity, and faces 10 years to life behind bars.

By then, the pandemic had locked alumni inside and prompted many to reconnect with classmates online. Kuch died, sparking memories from his former students. When talk of sex abuse sparked fights between alumni who wanted to share memories and those who found the discussion too negative, the first group split off and kept exchanging notes.

If the court certifies the lawsuit as a class-action, as the plaintiffs asked in their filing, others affected by abuse at the school can join them in suing. While the current lawsuit’s allegations focus on just a couple decades of the school’s history, the seven plaintiffs say fellow survivors could include “potentially hundreds.”

This story was originally published October 3, 2021 4:01 PM.





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A historical marker for the UNC School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, N.C. is pictured here at the entrance to the campus on July 19, 2021. JULIA WALL JWALL@NEWSOBSERVER.COM

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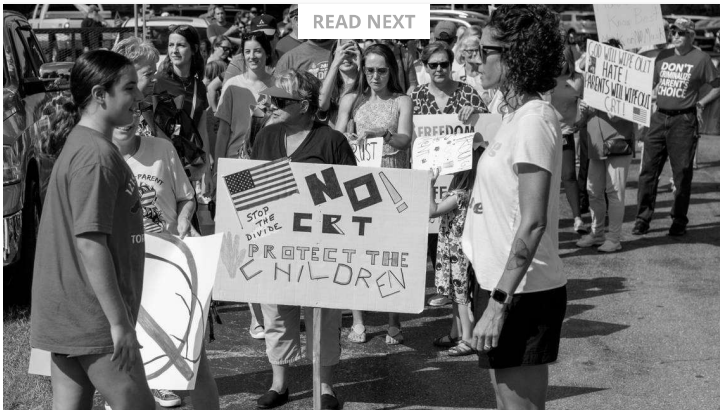
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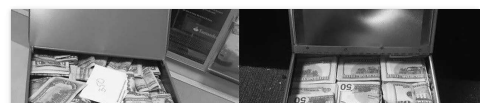
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