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BREAKING

## **UNCSA ignored sexual abuse of underage students, lawsuit alleges. Winston-Salem arts conservatory sued by former students**

Michael Hewlett

Oct 1, 2021

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The Main Street entrance to the unc School of the Arts. The Winston-Salem arts conservatory has been sued by former students who allege school administrators did not properly investigate allegations of sexual abuse.

David Rolfe/Journal

Michael Hewlett

**A** lawsuit filed this week alleges that faculty and administrators at the UNC School of the Arts willfully ignored rampant sexual abuse of underage students for years.

Seven former UNCSA students filed the lawsuit Wednesday in Forsyth Superior Court. They are represented by Gloria Allred, a well-known lawyer from California who represents victims of sexual abuse and discrimination.

Named as defendants are UNCSA and several former administrators and faculty members -- Jane Elizabeth Milley, the school's former chancellor who resigned in 1989; Larry Alan Smith, who was Dean of UNCSA School of Music; Peggy Dodson, who was the associate vice chancellor of High School Programs at UNCSA from 1981 to 2006; William "Bill" Tribby, who was dean of general studies from 1978 to 1999; Diane Markham, assistant dean of modern dance at the school; Alan Rust, who was dean of the School of Drama; and Richard Gain, who taught dance at the school.

The lawsuit alleges that for years, the defendants "knew or should have known of the dangerous culture that permeated the institution and that permitted and condoned the sexual abuse and exploitation of students attending the school."

"Despite this knowledge, the Defendant administrators at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts turned a willful blind eye to the egregious conduct suffered by so many of the school's students, specifically including Plaintiffs and others similarly situated," the lawsuit said. "Despite what the Defendant former administrators clearly knew or should have known about this horrific abuse and exploitation of minor students the Defendant former administrators failed to take any reasonable steps to protect Plaintiffs and other minor students similarly situated from the danger of being sexually abused and exploited by members of the faculty, staff and/or administration at the school"

One of the plaintiffs is Christopher Sonderund, who filed a lawsuit against the school in 1995. In that lawsuit, he alleged that dance instructors at UNCSA forced him into a sexual relationship when he was 16. Richard Kuch, once assistant dean of the School of Dance, and Gain, were suspended from their jobs.

The lawsuit in 1995 also described an environment at the arts school where faculty members openly had sexual relationships with students. Others knew about the behavior and did nothing to stop it.

The lawsuit sparked scrutiny at the arts school that went all the way up to the N.C. General Assembly.

A Winston-Salem Journal investigation published on Aug. 13, 1995, quoted former students and faculty who said that the arts school administrators ignored a widely known problem for years.

The incidents of sexual misconduct, the Journal said, went unchecked because the arts school did not have procedures in place that would have helped make students feel they could report these allegations.

Markham was also named in the 1995 lawsuit, which was dismissed. The N.C. Court of Appeals overturned the ruling, but it was dismissed again in Forsyth Superior Court, and the N.C. Court of Appeals upheld that ruling in 2001. Kuch and Gain resigned after school officials began a process to terminate it.

*This story will be updated...*

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