

PART 3 |

GOOGLE'S SECRET WEAPON

A Breakup Brings Down Big Tech's Proudest Ally

Joshua Wright enjoyed a career as the cleverest mind in antitrust law—until his past caught up with him

BY BRODY MULLINS

For a time, Joshua Wright juggled a wife, three children, three mistresses and a career as a law professor and antitrust consultant for Google, Qualcomm and Facebook.

He might have been able to keep it going. But in October 2021, Wright ended a yearslong affair with Elyse Dorsey, and everything started to tumble. He dumped Dorsey in a text, saying he was back with a former lover. “I’m so embarrassed for thinking you ever respected me,” she told him.

Dorsey, a former antitrust lawyer for the Justice Department, knew secrets that Wright had kept from his wife, employers and corporate clients. By last summer, everybody knew.

Since at least 2006, Wright had extramarital affairs with students who took his classes at George Mason University’s law school in Arlington, Va. Some of the women said they met his sexual demands out of fear he might sink their careers if they refused, according to court records.

During much of that time, Wright was the leading defender of Google, Qualcomm and other corporate giants against antitrust probes by federal regulators. While Wright was little-known outside of Washington, he built a multimillion-dollar career persuading

JOE GOUGH

antitrust regulators to leave his clients alone. While serving as a regulator himself on the Federal Trade Commission, Wright won a vote to limit the agency’s antitrust

powers.

The sexual-misconduct allegations later cost Wright a consulting business that brought in more than \$2 million a year and a university job that paid more than \$440,000 a year. Google, Amazon and Facebook lost an invaluable asset. It all started to unravel with Wright's breakup text message.

Wright, who has denied any wrongdoing, declined to comment for this article. His lawyer said there were inaccuracies but declined to specify what they were. A spokeswoman for Binnall Law Group, which is representing Wright, said, "We remain confident that the truth will prevail, leading to Mr. Wright's complete vindication in court."

Wright, 47 years old, cast Dorsey as a scorned woman who "embarked on a pre-meditated plan to ruin" his life in allegations he made in a defamation lawsuit.

"Having been one of Mr. Wright's closest confidants for over a decade, and therefore having insider knowledge of his employment and his major clients, she knew exactly where and how to hurt him professionally and reputationally," the lawsuit said.

A spokeswoman for George Mason University declined to comment because of continuing litigation. Wright filed a federal discrimination lawsuit against the school after he resigned.

In 2021, Wright had resumed an on-again, off-again affair with Dorsey that had started when she was a law student a decade earlier. In October that year, Wright texted her to say he was back with Lindsey Edwards, a younger woman who had taken Dorsey's place before.

"IDK what I've done so wrong in my life to end up in this total dumpster fire right now," Dorsey texted in the October 2021 breakup. "Or why I'm so expendable to you."

"I'm worried about me too," Wright told Dorsey. "My own spiral. But not trying to make it about me."

This account is based on interviews with dozens of Wright's former law-school

students, lawyers and people who know him, as well as court filings, divorce records, emails obtained from the FTC and George Mason University through public-records requests, documents submitted by Wright for his Senate confirmation hearing, lobbying disclosure reports and other public records.

One room

In 2010, Wright courted two women he taught in his law class. One was 24-year-old Angela Landry. He told her he had separated from his wife and that they lived in the same house only for the sake of their children.

They started a sexual relationship during Landry's second semester.

Dorsey, a 23-year-old student that year, asked career counselors to help her find a summer internship in antitrust law. They directed her to Wright. She told Wright she was going through a divorce, and Wright said he was, too.

That summer, Wright invited Dorsey on a trip to Northern California where he said he was meeting with executives. At the hotel, Dorsey learned Wright had booked one room with one bed.

“In that moment, Ms. Dorsey felt powerless to say no to her law professor and now her direct manager—especially since he had made it clear that he was the gateway to obtaining a job in antitrust law,” according to Dorsey's response to Wright's lawsuit.

Wright remained in sexual relationships with Dorsey and Landry during their years in law school and after they graduated. He “found ways to remind Ms. Landry that he had influence over her success as a student and the promise of her career,” Landry alleged in her response to Wright's defamation claim.

Landry said Wright opened doors for her at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, a London-based law firm that represented Google and other companies in their dealings with antitrust regulators overseas and in the U.S.

After Wright was appointed to the FTC in 2013, he hired several George Mason University law students. That year, Wright also helped Dorsey get a job as an associate at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, which represented Google on antitrust matters, according to court papers. In 2015, he hired Landry to be his

attorney adviser at the FTC, and they resumed their relationship.

Within a year, Wright was having affairs with Dorsey, Landry and Edwards, who was still a law student. He lived in McLean, Va., with his wife and three children. For a while, none of the women knew about the others.

Unpaid bills

Dorsey's job at the Justice Department expired at the end of the Trump administration in January 2021. She asked Wright for help, and they resumed their affair.

He gave her work at his consulting firm. Wright's clients included Google, Amazon, Facebook, Qualcomm and Walmart. Wright listed his income at \$170,082 a month when his wife filed for divorce that year. She received their \$3 million house, a \$714,326.56 payment and \$35,214 a month in spousal and child support.

Wright arranged a fellowship for Dorsey at the University of Virginia during the 2021-22 school year, and she moved to Charlottesville, Va. Wright told Dorsey that Google, Facebook and Amazon would pay for her studies.

Two months after their breakup, Dorsey hadn't received any of the money. She feared it was all a ruse. In December 2021, Dorsey filed the Title IX complaint with George Mason University. She alleged she had been in a sexual relationship with Wright while a student and that he later used his professional influence to retaliate against her. The university hired a law firm to investigate.

"I still have received zero dollars in funding," Dorsey wrote in a January 2022 email to Wright and the Federalist Society, which coordinated the fellowship funding.

The investigator hired by the university told Wright about Dorsey's sexual-harassment claim, as required by law. Dorsey alleged in her complaint that Wright had blocked payment of her fellowship money, and she reacted swiftly.

Dorsey contacted Nikhil Shanbhag, vice president and associate general counsel of Facebook parent Meta, on Jan. 31, 2022. Shanbhag oversaw Meta's antitrust arm and helped hire Wright as a company consultant. "I was relying upon this funding," Dorsey wrote. At the time, Wright was helping Shanbhag and Facebook tame FTC

opposition to the company's takeover of Within Unlimited, a fitness app.

A few days after Dorsey contacted Shanbhag, Wright emailed Shanbhag to ask if the money was en route. Wright also contacted Google, and Dorsey received \$85,000 from the company.

On May 6, 2022, Dorsey's inquiry cost Wright one of his biggest clients. She spoke with Daniel O'Connor, the director of public policy in Amazon's Washington office. The company paid Wright \$600,000 a year for consulting. O'Connor asked Wright, who acknowledged a sexual relationship with Dorsey. O'Connor told Wright that Amazon would no longer work with him.

Amazon officials believed it was inappropriate for Wright to ask for funds without disclosing his relationship with Dorsey, according to people familiar with the matter.

At a meeting of antitrust lawyers that spring, Dorsey told a friend about her affair with Wright. The friend said she heard a similar story from another George Mason University law-school graduate. It was Landry.

Dorsey and Landry met to commiserate and discuss a legal recourse.

In June 2022, the university's investigator interviewed Robert Mahini, a senior antitrust lawyer for Google, and she told Mahini about the Title IX complaint.

A Google spokesman said Mahini was asked about the funding and wasn't told about Wright's sexual history with students. Mahini told the investigator that the money owed to Dorsey was delayed because of an administrative mistake. The company decided to delay any action regarding Wright until the university investigation was concluded, the spokesman said.

The investigator also sent an email to Shanbhag, telling him the nature of Dorsey's complaint and requesting an interview. Shanbhag, after consulting with Facebook lawyers, declined to speak with the investigator.

In July, Dorsey received a payment of \$42,500 from Facebook for her fellowship.

Dorsey told her employer, Kirkland & Ellis, about the allegations and the possibility they might become public. The law firm ended Wright's \$1,400-an-hour consulting contract.

That summer, Wright bought a six-bedroom, 6,683-square-foot house for \$3.1 million in McLean, Va.

Edwards, who worked at Wilson Sonsini, moved in with him.

Tying the knot

During the Biden administration, Wright was a vocal critic of Lina Khan, the FTC chair and a thorn in the side of tech executives. Khan rose to prominence as a Yale law student when she published a 2017 paper called “Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox.” The paper argued that Amazon, the 21st century’s commerce titan, posed anticompetitive concerns yet escaped antitrust scrutiny.

Shortly after joining the FTC in 2021, Khan reversed a policy Wright had won while he served at the agency. Wright in 2015 persuaded fellow commissioners to shrink the agency’s power to police unfair or deceptive business practices, easing the threat of antitrust action against Google and others. Khan called the decision an “abdication of the commission’s statutory mandate, undermining our legitimacy.”

When that FTC power was restored in July 2021, the combined market capitalization of Google, Amazon and Facebook had grown to \$4.5 trillion from \$976 billion in 2015. During the year after the university investigator told Google and Facebook about Dorsey’s Title IX allegations, Wright remained a consultant for the companies.

In June 2023, Google gave Wright a new assignment. The company was fighting to keep liability protections for the information users share on YouTube and other internet platforms. President Biden and a bipartisan group of lawmakers supported ending the legal protections, a change that would, in effect, make Google and others liable for more online content.

Wright signed a six-month, \$430,000 contract with Google for academic and opinion articles saying the change would hurt the tech industry. He and his firm had contracts with the American Enterprise Institute, \$250,000 a year; Walmart, \$1,250 an hour; and the law firm Jones Day, \$1,500 an hour.

That spring, Wright’s lawyer engaged in settlement talks with Dorsey and Landry. Wright wanted their silence. They asked for money. No deal was reached.

Wright announced in an Aug. 7 tweet that he had resigned from George Mason University to work at his own law firm. Campus colleagues replied with praise for his work.

Scrolling through her phone that night, Cleveland State University law professor Christa Laser was infuriated by the posts. During a 2021 interview, Wright had dangled the possibility of a teaching job at George Mason University's law school, Laser said, and he emailed that night to ask if she was interested in going on a date. After she declined, the job disappeared.

Laser replied to Wright's tweet with a screenshot of that email. The next day, she tweeted again: "I encourage those who faced sexual advances from Josh Wright to step forward. If you don't, schools might send new students to him at his firm."

The posts prompted some of Wright's former students, including Dorsey and Landry, to air their experiences.

Google, Facebook, Qualcomm, Walmart and other clients dumped Wright shortly after. "Upon learning the details of the allegations, we immediately cut ties," a Google spokesman said.

In mid-August, Khan sent an email to FTC staff that called the allegations against Wright "deeply disturbing," and she encouraged agency employees to report sexual misconduct.

George Mason University President Gregory Washington sent a letter to students saying the school was "devoted to maintaining a community that is safe, dignifying and welcoming." The university has since strengthened its prohibition of sexual relationships between faculty and students.

Wright filed his \$108 million defamation lawsuit against Dorsey and Landry in late August. "Mr. Wright lost renewing contracts with multiple major consulting clients and employers, worth a total value of approximately \$1.55 million/year," the lawsuit said.

A week later, Dorsey and other women spoke about their allegations during an oncampus event called "MeToo at GMU."

Wright filed a lawsuit against the university afterward, alleging the school violated his due process and civil rights by siding with Dorsey and other accusers before concluding its investigation.

“If there was any doubt remaining that the university would do anything to comply with the #metoo movement and its inherent bias against men, this event dispels that doubt,” said Wright’s lawsuit, which is pending in federal court.

Wright sought court permission to end his \$35,000-a-month spousal and child support. His income has “effectively dried up,” Wright said in his petition last October. His wife filed a legal response, saying Wright’s loss of clients and income was effectively his own fault.

“He voluntarily resigned from his position at the Antonin Scalia Law School rather than face termination proceedings as a result of multiple allegations of his sexual misconduct with multiple women, including his former students,” Anhvinh Wright said in her court filing. The court agreed this year to reduce Wright’s payments to \$24,000 a month.

In November, Dorsey and Landry were honored by the American Bar Association for bringing attention to sexual harassment in the antitrust legal community. “Their stories struck a chord with me,” said Christine Wilson, a former FTC commissioner who knew Wright. “Elyse and Angela have thriving careers at wellrespected law firms and gain nothing by rocking the boat.”

To defend against Wright’s defamation lawsuit, Landry requested that Ed --wards turn over all communications with Wright related to his sexual relationships. Wright and Edwards each responded with motions seeking to limit the information that Edwards would have to disclose. On March 15, a Virginia court rejected the arguments and re --quired Edwards to turn over additional documents.

Two days later, Ed --wards, 32 years old, posted a photo of her --self on Instagram wearing a diamond ring. “I can’t wait to marry you,” her post said.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: JOE GOUGH

Elyse Dorsey in Falls Church, Va. MORIAH RATNER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

This is the third article in a three-part WSJ profile.

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