

PART 2 |

GOOGLE'S SECRET WEAPON

Professor's Affairs Went Unpunished

Joshua Wright drew millions in tech donations—and got away with seducing students

BY BRODY MULLINS

Anhvinh Wright called Lindsey Edwards to ask if she was having an affair with her husband, setting off a string of damning conversations that threatened one of Big Tech's greatest allies.

Lindsey says you have a lot of things to tell me. Like about other women, she told her husband, Joshua Wright, in February 2020.

Wright had hidden a yearslong sexual relationship with Edwards that started when she was a law student and he was a professor at her school. Wright helped Edwards join him at the law firm Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in Washington, where the affair continued.

Edwards had gone house hunting with Wright and told friends she looked ahead to marriage, children and a comfortable life together. For more than a decade, Wright built a multimillion-dollar career protecting Google, Amazon, Facebook, Qualcomm and other companies from antitrust regulators in his roles as a consultant, law professor and member of the Federal Trade Commission.

But Wright put off divorce, and the affair soured. Edwards told a friend she was prepared to tell Wright's wife everything.

“I have her number ready to go anytime,” Edwards wrote on Feb. 21, 2020, “he thinks he can just get away with all of it.”

JOE GOUGH

“Savage. I love it,” replied Angela Landry, a lawyer who a decade earlier began a yearslong affair with Wright while taking his law-school class at George Mason

University.

“He’s a f—ing predator,” Edwards wrote.

After learning of Wright’s infidelity, his wife hired a divorce attorney and kicked him out of the house. By then, Wright had been forced out of Wilson Sonsini for lying about his office romance.

None of it slowed his career. Wright was indispensable to some of America’s largest companies, as well as to the Antonin Scalia Law School at George Mason University, a public institution in Arlington, Va. Corporations donated millions of dollars to the university at his direction, and he made millions more working on their behalf.

After Wright was ousted, Wilson Sonsini looked for a way to keep him working. The Justice Department was investigating whether Google used anticompetitive practices to build its internet-search and advertising business, the kind of threat Wright was renowned for neutralizing.

The head of the law firm’s Washington office, Susan Creighton, wrote in a November 2019 email to Wright that she had spoken with other partners about keeping him involved with Google, one of the firm’s top clients. Any arrangement, she said, would make him “at least as well off, if not better off” than working for Wilson Sonsini.

“One such example might be for you to continue to bill through the firm, effectively as an ‘expert,’ and keep 100% of the revenues,” she wrote. “Another would be for you to bill directly to Google.” Creighton declined to comment.

Shortly afterward, Wright got a consulting contract with Google to collect and analyze economic data. A Google spokesman said the company “had no knowledge of the reasons for Mr. Wright’s departure from Wilson Sonsini.”

By October 2020, when the Justice Department filed its antitrust lawsuit against Google, Wright’s consulting business was thriving. At one point, his clients included Google, Amazon, Facebook, Qualcomm, Walmart and Kirkland & Ellis, one of the largest law firms in the U.S.

Two of Wright's most prominent clients kept him working long after an investigator informed them about a sexualharassment complaint. All of Wright's clients fled after Landry and other women publicly accused him last summer of initiating affairs while they were students in his law classes. Some alleged Wright used his influence—over academic and career opportunities—to keep them in a sexual relationship.

Wright, 47 years old, has denied wrongdoing. The affairs were consensual, he has said.

Wright evaded scrutiny over affairs with students because the university, like Wilson Sonsini, found him too valuable to lose, some of the women alleged. His conduct was known around campus, those women said, and complaints to school officials in past years went nowhere.

“His inappropriate relationships with students were apparently an open secret at GMU for years, but his misconduct also affected junior antitrust lawyers and scholars,” said Kellie Kemp, an antitrust lawyer who had worked at Wilson Sonsini when Wright did. “Yet leaders of law firms, academic institutions, and other organizations continued to employ him, sponsor him, or refer work to him well after they should have known better.”

Wright 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.”

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

George Mason University President Gregory Washington sent a letter to students after the sexual-misconduct allegations became public last summer. He said the school was devoted to maintaining a safe campus community. “When accusations come forward that suggest this standard has not been met,” Washington wrote, “we take them very seriously.”

This account is based on interviews with lawyers, former colleagues and people familiar with the matter, as well as court filings, divorce records, emails obtained

through public-records requests to the FTC and George Mason University, documents submitted by Wright during his Senate confirmation hearing, lobbying-disclosure reports and other public records.

Shielded

Wright used research papers, blogs and his legal expertise to defend U.S. tech corporations from federal antitrust regulators. After more than 130 countries set up their own antitrust agencies, Wright and the university found ways to benefit from the rise of foreign regulators.

Wright became executive director of the university's Global Antitrust Institute in 2015 and organized all-expenses-paid training seminars in such locales as Napa Valley in California, and Maui, Hawaii. From 2016 through 2023, more than 400 foreign officials and judges attended the seminars, which promoted a business-friendly view of antitrust matters. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch spoke at a seminar luncheon in 2019.

Flights, meals and accommodations were covered largely by donations from companies that stood to benefit from the training. The university wasn't required by campus rules to reveal donation figures and kept them secret.

The Wall Street Journal found that from 2018 to the end of last year, Google and Amazon each donated a \$1 million to the Global Antitrust Institute, a subsidiary of the Law and Economics Center, which funded Wright's research. Facebook parent Meta contributed \$675,000 from 2018 through 2020. Qualcomm pledged \$2.9 million in 2017.

Some university professors questioned whether the companies might be illegally lobbying overseas officials by donating large sums to the institute, which used some of the money to host the officials at fancy vacation spots. The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act prohibits U.S. companies from offering things of value to bribe foreign officials.

Members of the school's gift-acceptance committee wanted to review the issue in 2020. They learned the institute allowed companies to keep contribution figures secret. Its website lists Google, Facebook, Amazon, Qualcomm and Allergan's foundation as donors but doesn't say how much they gave. "It was an obvious

conflict of interest,” said Chris Kennedy, an economics professor on the committee. “These are companies that will have matters before the officials on these trips.” Kennedy and other committee members said they also believed school administrators violated a George Mason University policy that required the gift-acceptance committee to review donations from Wright’s consulting clients to make sure the money wasn’t creating a conflict of interest for the university or influencing academic work.

Wright told romantic partners that public disclosure of corporate donations, together with his consulting work for the same companies, might undermine the credibility of the academic research and advocacy he did on their behalf, according to the women.

George Mason University law school’s dean declined to tell the committee how much the companies contributed, Kennedy said. The committee received no answer regarding questions about compliance with conflict-of-interest rules. It was powerless to do anything about it.

The school wasn’t aware of “claims from the committee or elsewhere that the Global Antitrust Institute was allegedly in violation of the conflict-of-interest policies,” a spokeswoman said.

Kennedy contacted Andrew McCabe, who became an adjunct professor at the university following his job as acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the Trump administration.

Kennedy told him about the corporate contributions used to fund trips for foreign officials.

In early 2021, Kennedy was interviewed about it by FBI agents. He never heard back.

Wright turned at least one of the Global Antitrust Institute events into a romantic getaway.

He hosted Elyse Dorsey in January 2019 at a hotel in the Florida Keys during an institute seminar. Wright had initiated a sexual relationship with her when she was a law student. He later helped her get jobs at Wilson Sonsini, the FTC and Justice Department.

Four months after Dorsey's Florida trip, Edwards and Wright were in Lisbon, where Wright had organized a weeklong training seminar. While Wright lectured foreign officials at the Four Seasons hotel, Edwards posted photos of herself on social media.

A Wilson Sonsini associate saw the posts and alerted Dorsey, who had believed her affair with Wright was exclusive. Dorsey texted him in Lisbon.

"You know who's apparently not far away from you," she wrote. "Lindsey."

"Really weird," Wright replied, saying it was a coincidence.

"That's some bulls—," Dorsey said.

Nothing came of it

Wright for years conducted affairs with students, often more than one at a time. Former George Mason University law-school students said he sent friendly emails and messages to women he found attractive and, depending on their response, pursued them, according to court filings.

"He was a very likable professor, engaging and young," said Brandy Wagstaff, a lawyer at the Justice Department.

In 2005, Wagstaff was a first-year law student in Wright's class, and they had an affair the following year. Sometimes they had sex in his campus office.

"It is just shocking to me that those that shared office space with him would be clueless," she said.

Wagstaff had been an adjunct professor at the George Mason University law school for about six years when she heard from women on campus that Wright was still having affairs with students.

In 2017, Wagstaff reported what she heard to university officials. A campus investigator asked her to provide names. The students told Wagstaff they didn't feel comfortable identifying their classmates to university authorities, she said, and the matter was dropped.

Wagstaff didn't file a complaint to the university about her own affair with Wright until late 2020. "I feared retribution," she said. "He had so much power in the school." Nothing came of it, she said.

Table for two

In early 2021, Christa Laser, a law professor at Cleveland State University, responded to a job posting at George Mason University's law school. She sent an inquiry to Wright, who was in charge of hiring.

Wright said he was free to meet for dinner the next night at the Liberty Tavern, a restaurant by campus.

Over tapas at a high-top table by the bar, Wright told her the school might have the ideal opening for her, Laser said. The law-school dean always followed his recommendations, she recalled Wright saying.

After dinner, Wright walked Laser to her car, she said, and hugged her "for an uncomfortably long time."

Laser emailed Wright that night to thank him for meeting. He replied from his personal email: "I hope this doesn't come off as overly forward— but I really enjoyed dinner and talking with you and thought maybe you might be interested in making next time a 'date'?"

Laser declined the offer. Wright later told Laser he didn't have a job for her. Laser said she complained to the university's human-resources department about Wright's behavior. She said she spoke with a campus investigator for an hour on a video call. She never heard back.

At the end of 2021, the school received another complaint about Wright.

It was one that couldn't be ignored.

— Coulter Jones contributed to this article. This is the second article in a three-part WSJ profile. Part 3 coming Tuesday.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: JOE GOUGH

Angela Landry at Franklin Park in Washington. MORIAH RATNER FOR THE WALL

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