

LOCAL

Asheville School sued again for alleged sexual abuse; current faculty accused of cover-up

[Karen Chávez](#) Asheville Citizen Times

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In the second lawsuit brought against Asheville School in the past three months, an alum alleges he was sexually abused as a student at the elite private boarding school and that staff – including current teachers – did not report the abuse to authorities.

Charles Wilton Guy Jr., 43, who attended Asheville School 1991-94, claims in the lawsuit filed March 2 in Buncombe County Superior Court that he was sexually abused by English teacher Leslie Wise, 50, who was then known as Leslie Anne Rodgers, while he was in the 10th and 11th grades.

Guy, a North Carolina resident, alleges that sometime in 1994, Asheville School faculty and administration, including Karen Cianciulli, Pete Upham and Jay Bonner, became aware of Wise's sexual abuse of her student but did not to report it to the Department of Social Services, which was a violation of North Carolina's mandatory reporting laws.



Bonner, acting on behalf of Asheville School, allowed Wise to quietly resign, according to the suit, promising to keep her abuse of Guy secret in order to “avoid scandal.”

Related: Alleging sexual abuse by two teachers, Asheville School alum sues prestigious boarding school

Asheville School operates as a nonprofit with \$96 million in assets as of 2018. The school was founded as an all-boys school in 1900, and girls were first admitted in 1971. Tuition is more than most colleges, at \$63,000 a year.

Guy also claims that Asheville School intentionally denied him readmission for his senior year, preventing him from graduating with his class, constituting “a punishment for being a victim of Wise’s sexual abuse,” which was “emotionally and psychologically” damaging to him.

Guy is seeking a jury trial and at least \$25,000 in compensatory damages and at least \$25,000 in punitive damages for what he claims is the pain and suffering he experienced and continues to experience because of the alleged sexual abuse and the school’s response to his abuse.

Late to be filed under new state law

The lawsuit comes on the heels of one brought by former student and North Carolina resident Walter Triplette in December.

Triplette, represented by Charlotte-based Rawls, Scheer, Clary & Mingo PLLC – the same law firm as Guy – claims that he was sexually abused in the late 1960s on campus by Richard P. Woodhouse, who was a Spanish teacher, and William Crutchfield, who was a math teacher and dean of students, in multiple and separate instances.

The complaint also alleges that parents of several other students reported to Asheville School’s administration that Woodhouse had sexually abused and assaulted their sons, but that Asheville School chose not to report the abuse to police and instead dismissed Woodhouse from employment.

Related: Amid sex assault allegations, Asheville School alumni call for school head, board chair to resign

Amanda Mingo, one of Triplette’s lawyers, said Asheville School’s response to that lawsuit was originally due Feb. 18 but was extended to April 19.

Although the alleged incidents occurred decades ago, a new N.C. law that went into effect in 2019 opened a two-year window for child victims of sexual abuse to sue their abusers and the institutions that employ them, Mingo said.

Before the law change, victims only had until they were 21 to bring a lawsuit for acts committed against them as child, she said. The law allows people who were otherwise barred from bringing an action the opportunity to seek justice, but only if they file a lawsuit by Dec. 31.



Related: Reports of child sexual abuse rise sharply in Asheville, Buncombe County

Also known as the Safe Child Act, the law also requires that any adult “who knows or should have reasonably known that a juvenile has been or is the victim of a violent offense, sexual offense, or misdemeanor child abuse under G.S. 14-318.2 shall immediately report the case of that juvenile to the appropriate local law enforcement agency in the county where the juvenile resides or is found.”

Under this new law, Rachel Howald, 50, a former student at Ben Lippen School, filed a lawsuit Jan. 15 in Buncombe County Superior Court alleging that Pamela Kaye Herrington, a teacher and coach at the Christian high school formerly located in West Asheville, sexually assaulted her from 1986-88 when she was 16 and 17 years old, and that the school provided multiple opportunities for the teacher to victimize her.

Related: Alleging sexual abuse, former Ben Lippen School student sues teacher, school

“It is important that child victims of sexual abuse have an advocate and a voice. Victims of sexual abuse as a child have until December 31, 2021 to make claims, regardless of when it happened,” Mingo said.

In July 2020, Agnes Hill told Asheville School administrators she was sexually assaulted by an older male student on the campus when she was a 15-year-old freshman in 2019. The school conducted a Title IX investigation, which found no fault with the now-18-year-old boy, but did not call police, as required by law.

For subscribers: Teen says sex assault happened at elite Asheville School

Hill filed a police report against the boy. The investigation was completed two weeks ago. Buncombe County District Attorney Todd Williams referred the case to Henderson County D.A. Greg Newman, citing a conflict of interest because an employee in his office is married to someone “in a leadership position” at Asheville. School, Williams said.

Newman has not yet made a decision whether to bring charges against the boy, who withdrew last semester from Asheville School.

No Asheville School employee ‘took any steps to protect’ student

Guy was a boarding student his freshman year, 1991-92, and lived in a dormitory. During his sophomore and junior years, he attended Asheville School as a day student.

“Asheville School provided no education, information or training to Guy at any time concerning appropriate and inappropriate boundaries that were to be observed concerning teacher/student face-to-face interactions or communications in instructional and non-instructional settings,” according to the complaint.

Wise was hired in 1992 and lived in a girls’ dorm in a first-floor apartment that had a sliding glass door.



She met Guy in 1992 and in 1993, according to the lawsuit, “began a process of grooming Guy with the goal of sexually abusing him,” including inviting him to her apartment, having him enter and exit through the glass doors instead of the main dorm entrance, during school hours and in the evening “to evade detection.”

After months of grooming him, Wise lured Guy to her apartment using the guise of helping him one-on-one with a photography project, to have sexual intercourse with him, and also “using the power, authority and influence of an Asheville School teacher sexually abused Guy in his house when his mother was not home,” according to the court document.

Guy also alleges that Wise, on numerous occasions, purchased alcohol and persuaded him to drink it to lower his inhibitions so she could sexually abuse him, as well as brought Guy to off-campus locations and rented hotel rooms where she would sexually abuse him. The suit claims the abuse totaled more than 100 times.

The lawsuit claims that in 1994 Wise confided in faculty member Karen Cianciulli, who is currently the Asheville School fifth form dean and a science instructor, that she was “engaged in a sexual relationship with Guy.”

Cianciulli did not report this alleged abuse, as was required by teachers under N.C. General Statute Section 7A-543, to the school administration, police or any lawful civil authority, according to the lawsuit, nor did she report it to Guy’s parents.

According to Asheville School’s website, Cianciulli taught at the school from 1988-94, then left to teach at a New England boarding school before returning in 2000.

Pete Upham, the school’s assistant director of admission, also became aware in 1994 of Wise’s sexual abuse of Guy but did not report it, and at one time, Upham and his wife, Becky Upham, invited Wise and Guy, “as a couple,” to the Upham’s family apartment for dinner,” the suit says.

Pete Upham is now the executive director of the Association of Boarding Schools in Asheville.

The suit also alleges Jack W. “Jay” Bonner IV, who was then dean of faculty and is currently assistant head of school and a humanities instructor, knew about Wise’s sexual abuse of Guy but did not report it, as required by law.

He accepted the resignation of Wise, who agreed to wipe Asheville School from her employment record and never ask for a reference, “which in turn foreclosed risks of exposing that the school permitted Wise to sexually abuse Guy and were otherwise on notice of said abuse ...” the lawsuit states.

Wise then went to Europe to avoid criminal and civil liability but continued to abuse Guy by writing him letters, which “corroborate her sexual abuse of him.”

None of the Asheville School employees who knew Wise was sexually abusing Guy took any steps to protect him,” the lawsuit states.

Claims for relief

In the lawsuit, Guy claims negligence on the part of Asheville School, saying as an agent and employee of the school, Wise had a duty to ensure that the health, safety and wellbeing of her students, including Guy, was properly maintained, but that she “breached her duty of care for him.”

He also maintains negligent hiring, retention and supervision on the part of Asheville School, which had a duty “not to retain teachers like Wise, who would use their position of authority and influence to harm students including Guy.”

Related: Asheville School sex assault case: Buncombe DA Williams makes decision

The lawsuit further states that “Asheville School was wanton, reckless, officially tolerant, and deliberately indifferent to abuse of Guy by Wise.”

As a direct result, Guy claims he has suffered severe physical, mental and emotional injuries and has incurred medical and other expenses.

In an emailed statement March 3, head of Asheville School Anthony Sgro wrote:

“We are terribly saddened to read the allegations made by a former student in his petition filed yesterday that he asserts occurred in the early 1990’s. We are committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for our students, faculty, and staff and we work hard to bolster that commitment each and every day.”

Opinion: Faculty at Asheville School must speak out after being asked to 'move forward'

Wise did not return a call or email March 3. She is employed as a librarian and media specialist at Von E. Mauger Middle School in New Jersey, according to the school's web site.

“Adults sexually abused as children suffer profound, life long, and devastating consequences from their victimization. Our client has suffered throughout his lifetime and now North Carolina’s new law affords him the opportunity for justice,” said Katie Clary, one of Guy’s attorneys.

Karen Chávez has worked as a journalist for 25 years, including as an award-winning editor and reporter since 2000 for the Asheville Citizen Times and USA TODAY Network. Email her at KChavez@CitizenTimes.com or follow on Twitter @KarenChavezACT