

Questions abound after UI prof's death

Law professor Alan Fitzgerald Williams takes his own life on eve of termination; sexual harassment claims may have been a factor in his death

JOEL MILLS/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - On his last day as a University of Idaho law professor, Alan Fitzgerald Williams went into a friend's garage in Gig Harbor, Wash., tied one end of a rope around a pull-up bar, tied the other end around his neck, and hanged himself.

Williams did not leave a note, but his decision to end his life on Dec. 30 may have been related to the imminent loss of his job, according to the Pierce County (Wash.) Sheriff's Office. The university had been investigating sexual harassment allegations at least two female students made against him, according to a Moscow police report.

"It appears he suffered from depression over the (UI investigation) and was supposed to sign a termination agreement the following day," detective Ed Troyer told the Lewiston Tribune via email.

The university would not comment directly on its investigation into Williams. But whatever actions it took unfolded in a new policy landscape that emerged after a UI psychology professor gunned down a graduate student in 2011.

When Ernesto Bustamante killed Katy Benoit and then himself, the university responded in part by updating its sexual harassment policies and strengthening prohibitions against student-faculty relationships.

The UI confirmed that Williams, 48, was on paid administrative leave for the fall 2012 semester, but it denied public records requests from the Tribune both before and after his death seeking more information. In the first denial, the university cited restrictions on the release of private personnel documents. In the second denial, the university said the public interest in releasing the documents is "nonexistent."

The university also denied a request for anonymous student evaluations of Williams' performance, even though a student successfully sued in 2nd District Court for the public release of such evaluations in 1996. UI Associate General Counsel Guilherme Costa said the law school's system is separate from the rest of the university, and is used solely by the administration to evaluate faculty members. And unlike the rest of the university, students do not have access to law professor evaluations, he said.

In contrast, the university worked with the courts and the media to release Bustamante's employee records after his death in an effort to help the public understand what led to Benoit's shooting and his suicide.

The UI endured heavy criticism for what some saw as a tepid response to Benoit's charges that Bustamante pointed a gun at her several times during a tumultuous sexual relationship they carried on earlier that year.

UI President Duane Nellis did not consent to an interview about Williams and how the university's new sexual harassment policies are working. But in a statement, lead UI attorney Kent Nelson said the university continues to improve its training at the employee and supervisor level so sexual harassment can be readily recognized and addressed.

"For the last 18 months, the entire university has and will continue to focus on making improvements to the processes and policies concerning sexual harassment," Nelson said.

He also pointed to an increased emphasis on campus security through the creation of the Office of Public Safety and Security last year, where a key focus is the protection of students and employees who report instances of harassment.

College of Law Dean Donald Burnett said he is prohibited by state privacy laws from commenting directly on any university investigation of sexual harassment, but he said the news of Williams' death was "very, deeply saddening."

"It has created a profound sense of loss in the law school community," he said.

Burnett did say that the university's Office of Human Rights, Access and Inclusion always conducts thorough, evenhanded investigations of sexual harassment.

"Complaints are taken seriously," he said. "The university wants to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for our students, and policies are designed to provide due process and fairness to any employee against whom a complaint is made."

The dean also said it would be "unfortunate" to compare the Bustamante case to the Williams matter. "It would not be an accurate comparison, and would be unfair to Alan Williams' memory."

The women who made allegations against Williams did not respond to requests for comment. And without documentation from the university, the only information available comes from reports made to Moscow police last year and in 2011.

According to a police report from May 18, a UI law student - accompanied by College of Law Associate Dean Benjamin Beard - told detective Shane Keen that she and another female student had separately accused Williams of sexual harassment.

"(The student) told me she is in fear for her safety as Williams is a large, intimidating guy and she thinks Williams knows it is her that made the complaint," Keen wrote in his report. "(She) told me she thinks Williams knows where she lives and she knows he has multiple firearms."

It is Tribune policy not to name the victims or alleged victims of sexual harassment.

The student came to police to report that as she was jogging earlier that day, she saw Williams in his car.

"(She) told me Williams did not say anything to her or make any threatening gestures toward her," Keen wrote. "(She) told me she became very nervous and began running faster at which point, Williams sped off."

Moscow Police Department Lt. David Lehmitz said the student felt like Williams was following her.

The results of the UI's investigation into her claim were to be given to Williams later that week, and she feared he might retaliate against her, according to the report. Keen advised the student to always carry her cellphone, avoid being alone, and to call police if she saw Williams or if he tried to contact her.

Lehmitz followed up with the student early the next week, but she reported no further encounters with Williams.

Other than giving safety advice and working closely with the university, police couldn't do much with the case, Lehmitz told the Tribune in May.

"We do not have any information at this time that a crime has been committed," Lehmitz said, noting that police had not been informed of the results of any internal UI investigations into Williams.

When contacted after Williams' suicide, Lehmitz said there had been no activity in the case since last spring.

In a separate incident detailed in the police documents released to the Tribune, UI Director of Human Rights, Access and Inclusion Carmen Suarez requested extra police patrols at her residence in 2011 because she investigated a sexual harassment claim against Williams.

"Williams has not directly threatened Suarez but Suarez is concerned because Williams originally took responsibility for his actions but has now changed his mind and is going to file a lawsuit against the university," according to a police report from Aug. 29, 2011.

There is no record in 2nd District Court of Williams ever initiating legal action against the UI, according to the court clerk's office. There also is no record of a lawsuit ever being filed in federal court.

Williams had been a faculty member in the UI College of law since 2006. He was a 20-year U.S. Marine Corps veteran, a former military intelligence officer and military judge.

Williams had been in Gig Harbor for about three weeks to visit a friend from his days in the Marine Corps, according to the Pierce County Sheriff's Office. The friend's wife told an

investigator that Williams "had been having problems," but that she and her husband thought he was doing better.

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