

John Jay professors fostered 'cesspool' of sex misconduct, drug use, lawsuit says

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A former adjunct professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a recent graduate of the school sued in Manhattan federal court on Monday over allegations of sexual misconduct, claiming a “cesspool of sexism, misogyny, sexual harassment and illicit drug use” was created by longtime professors who allegedly gathered on campus in an area colloquially known as “The Swamp.”

The complaint was filed by recent graduate Naomi Haber, 25, and Claudia Cojocar, a 40-year-old sex trafficking survivor and former John Jay adjunct professor until May 2019. Cojocar cited situations during which she had been groped, beaten and sexually propositioned by Professor Ric Curtis, a well-published academic expert on sex trafficking and illegal drug use who has taught at John Jay for 33 years.

Curtis was also accused of pushing illicit substances on colleagues and underage students from his seventh-floor office of the Annex Building, the on-campus area frequently referred to in the lawsuit as “The Swamp.”

Haber, meanwhile, alleges that a 10-year professor at John Jay, Anthony Marcus, a regular trial expert on sex trafficking and prostitution, plied her with marijuana and alcohol after a criminology conference in Washington, D.C., in 2015, before “violently” raping her, according to claims.

The lawsuit says both Haber and Cojocar filed complaints, to no avail, in May 2018 with the university’s Title IX office, which handles gender-based grievances.

“Ms. Cojocar and Ms. Haber were forced to relive the pain of these experiences over the course of the next year, as John Jay engaged in an investigation that was completely improper and violated CUNY’s own policies and procedures,” the complaint says.

The lawsuit also cites offensive language used by the professors, including an unattributed text to Cojocar, which says “You’re just some dumb [expletive] who got trafficked.” Additionally, Haber said she was constantly told to lose weight, and that she wore too much makeup.

The “inadequacies” of the investigations, voiced by both Cojocar and Haber, “fell on deaf ears,” the suit says.

"John Jay must provide its students and faculty with an environment that is free from any form of sexual violence — period," said David Gottlieb, lead attorney for the plaintiffs. "John Jay has failed in this important obligation and has unfortunately sent a message that it is either unable or unwilling to adequately protect the members of its community."

In May, roughly a year after the complaints were filed, John Jay launched a disciplinary process with the goal of terminating the accused faculty members — which include professors Leonardo Dominguez and Barry Spunt, in addition to Curtis and Marcus — according to a statement from Director of Media Relations Richard Relkin.

"John Jay will promptly, thoroughly and fairly investigate any allegations of misconduct and hold accountable anyone — without exception — who is found to violate our policies," Relkin said.

The statement refers to a letter addressed to the John Jay College community in May saying the accused faculty members were placed on administrative leave as soon as University President Karol V. Mason became aware of the allegations last fall. Over 60 witnesses were interviewed as part of the investigation alongside an "extensive" review of emails and documents, and law enforcement authorities were notified, according to the letter.

The accused professors are currently prohibited from returning to campus. They were placed on administrative leave when the allegations reached Mason because of terms required by their union contract, the letter says.

The complaint seeks an unspecified amount of compensatory and punitive damages in addition to attorneys' fees and costs. Cojocarú plans to file an amended complaint with additional claims following a right to sue notice from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.