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Maine prostitution case is moving slowly

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KENNEBUNK, Maine (AP) — The dance instructor accused of turning her Zumba studio into a place of prostitution was an honors high school student who attended college and ran dance classes for the local parks and recreation program. She hosted charity events benefiting Toys for Tots and breast cancer research.

That's why some who know Alexis Wright say she's the last person they thought would get caught up in a headline-grabbing scandal.

The prostitution case involving the bubbly fitness instructor and more than 100 accused clients has made international headlines from this seaside town of 10,000 known for its beaches, charming homes and Tom's of Maine toothpaste, as well as the nearby "Summer White House" while President George H.W. Bush was in office.

For local residents, the criminal case has been evolving in slow motion, with police releasing more names of accused clients every two weeks. So far, 39 men have been identified, and more names are being released today.

Police said Wright videotaped many of the encounters without her clients'

knowledge and kept records suggesting the sex acts generated \$150,000 over 18 months. Explicit sex videos also surfaced online.

While she is portrayed as Zumba instructor gone wild, those who know her say that there's another side than the one in the news coverage — and that she didn't deserve to have her son removed from her care two weeks ago.

Andrew Scherzer, a longtime friend, said Wright is a great mother to her 7-year-old son and has lived a life full of Hallmark-style moments, with camping and canoeing trips and outings to the Portland Children's Museum and the New England Aquarium.

"If you were an outsider and spent time with her and her kid, the last thing you'd suspect is that she had this side business going on," said Scherzer, who went to high school and reconnected several years ago with the salsa-loving Wright, who attended concerts given by his Afro-Cuban band.

Others feel the same way.

Evelyn Barbour, who met Wright, 29, in the fifth grade and remained friendly through high school, said classmates at Mount Ararat High School were genuinely shocked by the charges.

"I thought she was a really nice person. I never, ever saw her be mean or rude to anyone. She was extremely kind," said Barbour, now a science teacher at the high school.

Wright was an honors student at Mount Ararat, where she played field hockey and participated in the concert band, wind ensemble and chamber singers.

She played clarinet and left a favorable impression on her band director.

"She was really nice kid, a sweet kid. She worked hard. She did what was expected. She blended in with lots of kids. She didn't stand out in any bad ways.

She was just a nice, sweet kid," said Allen Graffam, the director.

After high school, Wright took classes at Keene State College and Southern Maine Community College before earning a natural sciences degree in 2010 from the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn College.

Around the same time, the single mom was becoming known around Kennebunk for her Zumba classes, first offered in the auditorium of the Town Hall.

She hosted Zumba charity events for earthquake victims in Haiti, the Susan G. Komen foundation for breast cancer and Toys for Tots, among others. Those who attended her fitness classes remembered her as fun and energetic.

But police said there was more than Zumba going on after she opened a dance studio on Main Street, and later rented an office across the street.

Wright, of nearby Wells, has pleaded not guilty to 106 counts including prostitution and invasion of privacy for acts performed in her dance studio and in the rented office. Her business partner, insurance agent Mark Strong Sr., of Thomaston, pleaded not guilty to 59 misdemeanor counts.

Sarah Churchill, Wright's lawyer, said the media have presented a one-sided view of her client. Churchill anticipates more information about Wright's good works will make its way into the public's eye as the case proceeds to trial.

Wright lives in nearby Wells with her husband, whom she married over the summer. Both have declined to comment, as have other family members.

A lawyer who has seen the complete list of Wright's alleged clients says it contains the names of more than 150 men, some of them prominent. The 39 men who have been summoned so far on suspicion of engaging Wright's services include a former mayor and the local high school ice hockey coach.

The remaining names will trickle out for weeks to come.

As for Scherzer, he said he'd heard that there were sex videos posted online, but he said he figured what Wright did behind closed doors was her business. He knew her as an attentive mom who always had time and energy for her son. He said her husband is a contractor who has supported Wright throughout the ordeal.

Regardless of what criminal penalties she faces, she already paid a steep price when her son was removed from her care, Scherzer said.

Details of the custody case weren't available, including where her son is, but a judge on Wednesday dismissed a complaint from the boy's father — not her husband — seeking full custody. The father, Benjamin Hopkins, alleged she posed nude in pictures with the boy, who was partially covered with a sheet.

The judge dismissed the complaint when neither the father nor Wright showed up for a court hearing on the matter, The Portland Press Herald reported.

"She feels like she's dead right now. She's having the only thing that's important to her ripped away," said Scherzer, who's worried about his friend. "Under the circumstances, she's doing what she can, which is to not break down and go crazy and give up."

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