

OPINION

Me Too means the Legislature must investigate lobbyist's claim against Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita

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Opinion: If #MeToo is important, the Legislature will open an investigation into a lobbyist's claim that she was sexually harassed by Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita.

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State Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita, R-Scottsdale, an anti-abortion conservative, said she joined the cause anyway because she realized apprehensions about the ERA are misconceptions. (Photo: Sean Logan, The Republic)

The bombshells just keep exploding at the state Capitol.

Just as the House opens an investigation into [love letters sent by Rep. David Cook to a lobbyist](#), we learn that another lobbyist accused then-Rep. Michelle Ugenti-Rita and her then-boyfriend of soliciting her for a threesome.

The female lobbyist made the claim in 2017, after Ugenti-Rita and several other legislators accused then-Rep. Don Shooter of sexual harassment.

Investigators skewered Shooter, writing a 75-page report that led to his political doom.

But they blew off the lobbyist's claims of sexual harassment by Ugenti-Rita. There was, they wrote, no "independent, credible" evidence that the Scottsdale legislator knew her then-boyfriend Brian Townsend was sending naked pictures of her to the lobbyist.

[Now that lobbyist, in a sworn deposition taken in November and made public this week](#), says House investigators didn't even check out her story. Didn't even talk to her boss, who she said knew about the text messages.

"At some point did you feel that the investigators ... did not believe your account of what happened or chose not to believe?" a lawyer asked the lobbyist during her deposition, taken in Shooter's lawsuit against Ugenti-Rita.

"Maybe, yes," she replied.

If Me Too matters, then the Arizona Legislature should reopen an investigation into what happened here.

Body shots and a threesome offer

Ironically, it was Ugenti-Rita who first began exposing the dirty laundry flapping in the breeze at the state Capitol. In 2017, she wrote a Facebook post complaining that she had been sexually harassed by male legislators and faced retribution. She later identified Shooter, R-Yuma, as her harasser. Several other women also came forward and Shooter was expelled in early 2018.

Meanwhile, this lobbyist, contacted as part of the House probe, told investigators said that she had been sexually harassed in 2016, both by Ugenti-Rita and Townsend, then an aide to Gov. Doug Ducey. But nothing came of it.

Apparently, investigators had no interest in the lobbyist's story that Ugenti-Rita, during a night of drinking, showed her pictures of herself in lingerie.

Or that Ugenti-Rita then laid across a bar as the then-26-year-old lobbyist and another woman did body shots – drinking alcohol out of the lawmaker's belly button then licking the salt from her stomach and sucking a lime from her mouth. (Ugenti-Rita admitted this in a deposition but said she was doing it at the request of the lobbyist.)

Investigators reported the lobbyist's claim that she woke up the next morning to find that Townsend had texted her a nude picture of Ugenti-Rita. But they discounted her belief that Ugenti-Rita knew about it.

Just as they apparently discounted her claim that Townsend the following month texted a photo of himself performing a sex act on the legislator, along with this message: "she wants you to be with us."

And her claim that Ugenti-Rita, during a trade conference, repeatedly asked her up to her hotel room until she felt she had no choice but to go. There, she says, the lawmaker was "lying very provocatively" on a couch and asked her to stay the night -- or at least stick around until Townsend showed up.

"At this point, I had fully realized that I believe that she knew about the text messages and that she was involved in the threesome request," the lobbyist said.

Did House investigators actually investigate?

House investigators didn't buy it.

"Ms. Ugenti-Rita unequivocally denied any knowledge of, or involvement in, the conduct," they wrote, in their 2018 report to then-House Speaker J.D. Mesnard. "We found her testimony in this regard credible. She was visibly distraught, briefly lost the composure and confidence she had generally displayed during our interactions with her, expressed genuine surprise and shock, and conveyed sincere sympathy for (the lobbyist.)"

The lobbyist never filed a formal complaint against Ugenti-Rita -- not so surprising given that her job requires her to be on good terms with lawmakers. In her deposition, which she was forced to give under subpoena, she said her encounters with Ugenti-Rita and Townsend "caused a lot of anxiety and sleep problems" and that she told her boss she didn't want to be around them.

"They are both powerful people in Arizona politics, and I didn't want them to affect any future career opportunities or harm me in any other potential way," she said. "I was being strategic and I was trying to navigate the situation to the best of my ability in a time before the Me Too Movement and it was okay to come out about these sorts of things."

Ugenti-Rita, now a state senator, has denied the accusations, saying she had no idea Townsend was sending nude pictures of her to the lobbyist. She accused Shooter of weaponizing the photos.

"He has been a part of making sure everyone associated with me in my private life, in my work life, know about the pictures," she said in her deposition last year. "He has weaponized them. And it feels like a virtual rape over and over again."

Yet in December 2018, Ugenti-Rita married the guy who sent out the naked pictures.

Here's what we need to know

There are lots of questions about what happened here, chief among them:

Why was Shooter given the bum's rush out of the Legislature while Ugenti-Rita got what appears to be a pass?

If that's not what happened, why wasn't a full accounting of this investigation contained in the public report? What steps were taken before House investigators concluded the lobbyist's claims were invalid?

And finally, why did Mesnard, during his deposition, claim legislative privilege more than 50 times when asked questions about the investigation?

It goes without saying that a new investigation is warranted. Along with that, may I suggest that our leaders enact a code of conduct?

One that perhaps forbids legislators from allowing lobbyists to drink alcohol out of their belly buttons?

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This article can be found at: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/laurieroberts/2020/02/05/me-too-sexual-harassment-arizona-legislature/4669559002/>