

A Famed Doctor, a Troubled Prosecutor and a Case That Went Untried

By Julie Bosman and Monica Davey

March 5, 2018

Amanda Thomashow, a recent graduate of Michigan State University, made up her mind in April 2014. She was going to report Lawrence G. Nassar, a prominent doctor who treated star gymnasts.

He had sexually assaulted her during a medical exam weeks before, she soon told a campus police officer, who listened and took notes for close to an hour. The police eventually delivered the results of their investigation to the office of Stuart Dunnings III, the longtime prosecuting attorney in Ingham County, Mich.

On three separate occasions, the university's police force said, they asked Mr. Dunnings's office to bring charges of criminal sexual conduct against Dr. Nassar in Ms. Thomashow's case. And three times, they said, their request was denied.

Mr. Dunnings's office was one in a long line of agencies that failed to take action against Dr. Nassar, who was eventually convicted of sexually assaulting girls and women under the guise of medical treatment. More than 250 have accused him of abuse, and emotional sentencing hearings in January and February drew national attention.

Like Dr. Nassar, Mr. Dunnings, 65, had accumulated a lifetime of connections and respect — the rewards of a man considered to be at the top of his profession.

Mr. Dunnings, who worked in Lansing, near Michigan State, where Dr. Nassar was a longtime faculty member, had been the county prosecutor for nearly two decades. Known to wear a bow tie, Mr. Dunnings came from a distinguished family of lawyers; friends and associates said that his father had been the first African-American lawyer in the city.

“When it came to crime and punishment, he was as high-profile as you can get in Lansing,” Warren Williams said of Mr. Dunnings, whom he has known since they grew up in the same neighborhood in the 1960s. “He was known as a very hard-nosed, no-nonsense, staunch law-and-order type of guy.”

But around the time that Mr. Dunnings's office was considering whether to bring charges against Dr. Nassar, Mr. Dunnings was keeping secrets of his own.

In March 2016, everything came to a sudden, stunning halt: Mr. Dunnings was arrested outside a Lansing coffee shop and charged with 15 prostitution-related crimes. Law enforcement officials said that between 2010 and 2015, Mr. Dunnings had paid for sex from prostitutes across three counties. Mr. Dunnings soon resigned as Ingham County prosecutor and pleaded guilty to misconduct in office and soliciting a prostitute. He was eventually disbarred and banned from practicing law in Michigan.

Ms. Thomashow, 28, said she learned only in recent months that Mr. Dunnings's office had declined several times to press charges in her case against Dr. Nassar, part of a series of delays that permitted the doctor to continue his behavior for two more years, until women began going public with their accounts of abuse.

“When I heard that the police had tried to get charges and that Stuart Dunnings's office had said no, I was not surprised,” Ms. Thomashow said. “He was busy doing his own thing.”

A Report, but No Case

It is not clear whether Mr. Dunnings, then the top prosecutor in the county, was ever personally aware of Ms. Thomashow's accusations against Dr. Nassar, though they were laid out in detail in a police report sent to his office.

According to the report, Ms. Thomashow, an athlete, went to see Dr. Nassar because of pain in her hip. During the exam, he began to massage her breast, removing his hand only when Ms. Thomashow told him to stop, she told the police.

Dr. Nassar then told a female resident in the room to leave and ordered Ms. Thomashow to lie face down on the table, the report said. Without wearing gloves, he put his hand down her pants and massaged her vagina with three of his fingers for one to two minutes. He was “extremely close” to inserting a finger in her vagina, the report said, adding: “She told him to stop and that he was hurting her.”

Ms. Thomashow had told her story in detail to Valerie O'Brien, a university police officer, and Kristine Moore, a Title IX investigator, during an interview that May in a campus building, she said.

“I left feeling like these women had really heard me,” Ms. Thomashow said. “They seemed really, genuinely concerned, like they were going to make sure it would never happen again.”

Months later, Ms. Thomashow was informed that her Title IX complaint had been considered and that Dr. Nassar’s conduct was found to be not sexual in nature, leaving her furious and disgusted. But she also learned that the separate investigation by the university police was underway.

By 2015, the university police had sent a warrant request to the office of the Ingham County prosecutor, and the case was assigned to Steve Kwasnik, an assistant prosecutor in Mr. Dunnings’s office.

Mr. Kwasnik, a lawyer in the crimes against children unit, said that he reviewed the report and consulted with several other senior lawyers in the office, a typical practice. The office decided not to pursue charges against Dr. Nassar.

Mr. Dunnings was not consulted, Mr. Kwasnik said in an email. Mr. Kwasnik said that to his knowledge, Mr. Dunnings, the head of the office, was not aware of the case. Mr. Dunnings did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

“I determined that we would not be able to sustain our burden at trial,” Mr. Kwasnik said. “Given the information available to me at the time, this was the correct decision and I stand by that decision.”

A Prosecutor’s Downfall

By 2014, Mr. Dunnings, a Democrat, was midway through a fifth four-year term as the elected prosecutor of Ingham County.

From the time he was young, it always seemed that Mr. Dunnings would be a lawyer, said Mr. Williams, who has worked in public relations and journalism and knew Mr. Dunnings for decades. There were great expectations for the Dunnings children, Mr. Williams said.

“They had the nicest place in the neighborhood, and Stuart seemed to be groomed for success,” he said.

In his early years as a prosecutor, Mr. Dunnings made a name for himself in part by aggressively pursuing prostitution cases, and taking special, public aim at people involved in human trafficking.

In later years, his team of assistant prosecutors seemed to be juggling cases on their own, according to some who worked around the office.

Gretchen Whitmer, a former state senator and Democratic candidate for governor in 2018, stepped in temporarily as Ingham County prosecutor after Mr. Dunnings was removed. After talking to people in the months after he left, Ms. Whitmer said she came away with a sense that Mr. Dunnings had often been gone.

“He was an absentee prosecutor,” she said in an interview. “He wasn’t around very much.”

Rumors sometimes reached local law enforcement about Mr. Dunnings’s behavior. Gene Wriggelsworth, who was the sheriff of Ingham County at the time, said the authorities would occasionally hear that Mr. Dunnings was getting away with misdeeds.

“We would try to drill down on that, and I have to tell you — if there was something to it, we couldn’t find it,” he said.

Then came a new tip. This time, the investigators unraveled the case. They said Mr. Dunnings had paid prostitutes for sex, finding women on websites like Backpage.com and occasionally having sex with prostitutes in his office during working hours, according to court documents. One woman, who was not a prostitute, came to Mr. Dunnings for help with a child custody dispute and he suggested that she have a sexual relationship with him for money; she eventually agreed, afraid that he would use his power as prosecutor to harm her if she refused, the investigators said.

Mr. Wriggelsworth said Mr. Dunnings had been a friend and political ally in the decades past; the two men had even done some television advertisements together.

“It was a huge betrayal to me,” the former sheriff said of Mr. Dunnings’s crimes. “I have not had a word with him since.”

Scandals Intertwined

In the end, Bill Schuette, Michigan’s attorney general, pursued cases against both men — the doctor and the prosecutor. The two cases, both involving sex crimes, made their way along separate paths that intersected at odd moments. Two scandals, separate but intertwined, were unfolding publicly at once.

In November 2016, Mr. Dunnings pleaded guilty to a felony charge of misconduct in office and one count of engaging the services of a prostitute, a misdemeanor. Mr. Schuette, who is now seeking the Republican nomination for governor of Michigan, offered Mr. Dunnings a plea deal; he was sentenced to a year in jail and three years of probation.

It was a stunning fall for the prosecutor, who grew emotional in the courtroom, telling the judge at one point: “I betrayed the trust of the people.”

On the day of Mr. Dunning’s sentencing, another man was in the local jail. Appearing in the courtroom via video, Dr. Nassar pleaded not guilty to three counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct. It had taken years since reports of abuse were first made against Dr. Nassar, but the story was finally starting to emerge.