

UNC prof called master teacher, master manipulator

Students say he used position of power to create sexual situations with male students



By John Moore, The Denver Post

Vance Fulkerson boasts an extensive network of show-business contacts, is a highly sought conference presenter and has been responsible for bringing prestige and top talent to the University of Northern Colorado's highly regarded School of Theatre Arts and Dance for nearly two decades.

At that school, however, there were students who found him to be a master manipulator, a sexual predator who at times used the promise of opportunity or the threat of academic repercussion to carefully target and pursue closeted and openly gay young men.

Those who went along were known as "Vance's Boys."

Some who didn't say they were harassed or sexually violated.

Students felt like they had no recourse, and a former school official complains that sexual harassment policies were not always clear. The university has hired an outside company, which along with the state attorney

general's office is now investigating to determine what the school could have done differently.

Fulkerson, 63, now stands charged with sexual exploitation of a child and other crimes after being arrested for videotaping guests in his home using his bathroom and shower. Many of those he taped are believed to be his own vocal students. And he frequently lodged minors who used the same bathroom.

"He was using that school to peddle his sexual addictions," said Ned Stresen-Reuter, who dropped out of UNC in 1996 and says Fulkerson threatened to revoke his scholarship after he refused the teacher's advances. "He's ruined a lot of good people."

People like Chris Gunn, a former student who says in the winter of 1995 Fulkerson took the then-18-year-old freshman to Europe under false pretenses, relentlessly pursued physical contact and, once rebuffed, attempted to take from Gunn what Gunn wasn't offering in a Paris hotel. Within weeks, Gunn says he was diagnosed with clinical depression and dropped out of school.

"The extent of that man's damage runs deeper than any of us can imagine," said former UNC teacher Jeanette Kolokoff, now executive director of the Greeley Philharmonic. "Lots of young men are carrying around burdens that need to be set free."

Fulkerson could not be reached for comment. But his attorney, Alexander Garlin of Louisville, said people should not jump to conclusions about him.

"Typically, cases like these are complicated," Garlin said. "We are at the very beginning of this process. It's far too early to draw any conclusions."

There are many UNC graduates with only positive

things to say about their time at one of the nation's most respected theater programs.

UNC's undergraduate theater department, now chaired by David Grapes, has about 320 students divided into four majors programs: musical theater, acting, technical theater and theater education. Combined, UNC has sent 24 alums on to Broadway since 1994, and its alumni populate the Denver acting community more so than any other school.

UNC's summer repertory company, The Little Theatre of the Rockies, is Colorado's oldest theater company, at 75 years. Before his arrest, Fulkerson was to direct "Forever Plaid," for the Little Theatre, opening July 29. It was a member of that cast, a UNC student who graduated in May, who discovered a bathroom camera and reported it to police.

But 2007 grad Harrison Butler said he had a "very positive experience" at UNC and calls Fulkerson "a great teacher." The worst crime many like him can imagine Fulkerson committing is that he wore clogs, a girdle — and perhaps the most ridiculed hairpiece in Greeley.

Yet since Fulkerson's arrest, many, like Gunn, have come forward to say Fulkerson has continually abused his power as the head of UNC's musical-theater program to create sexual opportunities with students. Corroborating witnesses say it's been a pattern of planned seductions that goes back more than 30 years, at two previous colleges.

"It was obvious then what his thing was," said veteran Boulder's Dinner Theatre actor Wayne Kennedy, who studied with Fulkerson at Loretto Heights College and again in the University of Utah's graduate school. Though Kennedy was a married student and therefore never a viable target, he said, "There was never any doubt that he was always searching out for the next young freshman he was going to take under his wing. It was never a mystery at all."

That pattern included showering young men with praise, privilege and expensive gifts. Sharing his alcohol and marijuana with them. Whisking them away on weekend trips all over the world, where he would take them to porn clubs and later initiate often unwelcome

sexual contact in hotel rooms that always seemed to have just one bed.

If rejected, Stresen-Reuter says, Fulkerson's flattery could turn on a dime to humiliation and retribution. During a weekend road trip his freshman year, Stresen-Reuter said Fulkerson made sexual advances. When he did not reciprocate, he said, Fulkerson threatened to pull his renewable scholarship.

"Shortly after I turned down his advances, he said in front of the class that I had no talent, and that it was more interesting to watch my crotch than me," said Stresen-Reuter, who transferred after one semester, leaving behind a free ride to college, he said, just to get away from the most powerful person in his degree program.

"I was fresh off the boat, and I had no clue how to handle such a situation," he said. So he turned not to the school or to police but to his parents — and they wanted him out.

"But there was no infrastructure within the university to deal with something like that anyway," he said. "So it just went on and on."

Former UNC graduate school president William Sherman shares that sentiment. He recalls attending a meeting for new teaching assistants in 1998 with Kay Norton, now president of the university. She was then head of the school's legal department.

"When I asked about sexual harassment," Sherman said, "she told us they could not get into trouble — because they had no policy."

A spokesman for Norton said Friday that "during her four-year term, she and the board addressed discrimination and sexual harassment policies and approved revisions that reflected nuanced standards."

The school now has a detailed policy, including procedures for filing complaints.

"It is the policy of the (Board of Trustees of the) university to maintain the University as a place of work, study, and residence, free of sexual harassment and exploitation of its students, faculty, staff and administrators," it reads.

“Vance’s Boys”

Over the years, some male students have entered into consensual relationships with Fulkerson. Those who did were known within the program as “Vance’s Boys,” said one female UNC graduate who asked not to be identified.

“But over time,” she said, “some were forever changed by these relationships. Some became dark and very depressed.”

“Vance’s Boys” went along, Gunn said, “because he was always talking about his show-business connections. He’d say things like, ‘I am going to hook you up in New York and you are going to be a star.’”

“I think he’s a pathological liar. I don’t know what part of any story he tells is true.”

In the past two weeks, The Denver Post has heard accounts from more than 10 men who say Fulkerson initiated some form of unwelcome sexual contact. Gunn and others say a discombobulated freshman in his first semester away from home is ill-equipped to fight off advances from the head of his academic department.

Christopher Johnson was a 22-year-old senior in 1991, Fulkerson’s first year at UNC. Fulkerson invited Johnson to help him make a presentation at a high-school thespian conference in Denver. Johnson was told there would be a group of students, and separate hotel rooms. Instead, that first night, it was Fulkerson and Johnson alone, in a one-bed room.

Johnson says Fulkerson got him very drunk, took him to a porn arcade and later initiated an unwelcome sexual act that Johnson says he submitted to, just to get it over with.

Johnson filed a written harassment complaint with now retired Dean Howard Skinner, but nothing came of it.

Upon Gunn’s return from Paris, he says he started sleeping through his days. Favorite teacher Mary Martin Schuttler noticed he was skipping her class and checked on him.

Gunn says Schuttler told him she would take his story to Tom McNally, like Fulkerson, one of four department chairs.

McNally said last week a meeting was set up with Gunn but that he never showed. Gunn says he knows of no meeting. Instead he awaited a response that never came. When it didn’t, he said, “I dropped out of life.”

He quit school in the middle of his second semester and moved to New York, where he’s been for the past 13 years.

That a promising UNC freshman’s life was permanently altered by the possible miscommunication, Gunn said, speaks to the lack of an infrastructure at the university to handle claims like his.

McNally insists he had no idea of any of Fulkerson’s alleged bad behavior until after his arrest.

“He has been a friend and colleague for 30 years,” said McNally, who taught with Fulkerson at Loretto Heights and helped him get hired at UNC in 1991. “But absolutely, positively not. I didn’t know about any of that kind of activity. That doesn’t mean it’s not true — but I didn’t see it.”

Former student Stephen Anson, who said he got fed up with the UNC theater department and quit in the 1991-92 school year, is among dozens who have told The Post that Fulkerson’s bad behavior was well-known.

“If the university is saying, ‘We had no idea,’ that’s just not true,” Anson said. “There is just no way. For anyone to say otherwise, they are either lying or just completely obtuse.”

That, more than anything, has split the close-knit UNC community — between those who want the healing to begin without another word uttered about the scandal, and those who believe the healing can’t begin until the full extent of Fulkerson’s actions are known.

Some UNC theater grads have formed a Facebook group to commiserate over Fulkerson’s arrest. It’s called “Rugs, Corsets, and Scandals: An open discussion of the horribly tacky events that are drizzling (excrement) over our beloved program.”

The sentiment there pervades: If Fulkerson’s behavior was such common knowledge among students, how could those in power not also know?

“Surely, people at the university knew,” Stresen-Reuter said. “That’s a given.”

But one thing has definitely changed: Thirteen years after Gunn left UNC, another student went to his favorite teacher: Schuttler. It was the man who discovered Fulkerson's bathroom camera on June 30.

This time, she drove him straight to the police.

High schoolers in home

Student testimonials about physical impositions by Fulkerson slow to a trickle after 1999-2000, the year Fulkerson took a one-year leave of absence. Retired Dean Skinner said Thursday he can't recall the reason for Fulkerson's sabbatical, but other teachers said they were told Fulkerson had grown disillusioned with teaching and was considering new career options. Instead, he was back at UNC in the fall of 2000.

The man who discovered Fulkerson's camera had moved into Fulkerson's house only three days before.

On July 2, police executed a search warrant and collected more than 130 DVDs and 50 VHS tapes, though it's not known how many of them contain illicit material. Police also found 29 photographs of nude boys ages 5 to 16.

Last summer, Fulkerson directed a special production of "Hairspray" for the Educational Theatre Association's annual festival. More than 50 of the nation's top high-school actors and crew were chosen to come to Greeley to prepare the show for three weeks.

Three of them stayed at Fulkerson's house.

"This is very hard for an awful lot of people," said ETA executive director Michael Peitz. He said he has no information that any of the students were filmed, but letters have been sent to the families of every cast member, apprising them of the situation.

Fulkerson is scheduled to appear in court July 30 and in the meantime is on paid administrative leave. UNC's faculty senate last week passed a resolution expressing concern over the allegations. It said the alleged behavior, if true, would be "profoundly damaging" to the students subjected to it, and the campus as a whole.

The faculty senate vowed to conduct a review of university policies once the fall semester begins to make sure they promote a campus atmosphere that is free

from abuse or harassment.

As for the theater department, McNally said, "Here's a promise from the oldest faculty person here: We will fix what's wrong."

And when it comes to teacher-student relations, he added: "I can't imagine another department that's going to be more careful than ours."