



PLAY WITH SOUND

# Abused, then mocked

Acclaimed violinist says she was sexually assaulted by her renowned teacher at the Curtis Institute, and then disregarded when she reported it.

by [Tricia L. Nadolny](#) and [Peter Dobrin](#), Updated: July 25, 2019

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As a classical violinist, Lara St. John has cut a fearless path from child prodigy to international fame. She has performed with some of the world's greatest orchestras, founded her own record label, and challenged the norms for female soloists in the traditionally buttoned-up genre.

But long before that, she says, she suffered a tragedy that left her broken and her future uncertain.

» ***UPDATE: Curtis Institute will review sexual assault policies after Inquirer story reports abuse***

St. John says she was repeatedly sexually abused by the man trusted to hone her talent, renowned violinist and teacher Jascha Brodsky. Then, she says, she was disregarded when she reported what had happened to an administrator at Philadelphia's elite Curtis Institute of Music.



**FILE PHOTO**

Violinist Jascha Brodsky was accepted as a student at the Curtis Institute in his 20s, then taught there for the better part of five decades. He is a celebrated teacher, and nearly a dozen members of the Philadelphia Orchestra studied with him, as well as violinists with the Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In 1986, when she told the school's then-dean, Robert Fitzpatrick, that she had been abused, he mocked her, she recalls.

“‘Oh, for God’s sake, who do you think they’re going to believe? Some 15-year-old kid or someone who has been here for decades?’” St. John, 48, remembers him saying. “And I agreed with him totally. They wouldn’t believe me.”

Three decades on, two friends who were with her say they, too, remember Fitzpatrick dismissing St. John’s claims.

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Fitzpatrick, who served as the school's dean for more than two decades, retired from Curtis in 2009 and now lives in Paris. In an interview, he adamantly denied St. John's recollection. He said she told him that the then 79-year-old Brodsky had been, in his words, "touchy feely" but made no mention of sexual abuse.

"Nonsense," he said.

Fitzpatrick said that he spoke to Brodsky after the meeting and asked him to be more mindful with female students. He said he did not mention St. John's claim and never followed up. Brodsky continued to teach at the school until shortly before his death in 1997.

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The Inquirer has located four other women who say that Brodsky pursued them sexually while they were Curtis students in the 1980s. Each asked to remain anonymous to protect her privacy.

One said that in 1988 — two years after St. John met with Fitzpatrick — Brodsky took her to dinner, then attempted to kiss her. She was 18 and he, in his 80s. She said she pushed her teacher away and scolded him.

Another former student said that she was 16 when Brodsky began inviting her to dinner or to listen to records with him. At times, she recalled, he would reach out to hold her hand. She said he once tried to kiss her neck. She softly said no, and he apologized. She continued to study with him for two more years.



ICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

St. John, photographed before a May performance in Richmond, Va., is an acclaimed musician who has released more than a dozen albums.

A third woman said that when she was 20 and studying with another teacher, Brodsky initiated a friendship that developed into a two-year sexual relationship. She described herself as painfully shy and vulnerable when Brodsky first invited her to dinner. She said she looks back on the relationship with regret and believes she was taken advantage of.

Another woman recalled that she was 20 when Brodsky, her teacher, invited her to listen to records at his office at the nearby New School of Music on Spruce Street, where he also taught. He tried to kiss her, and when she stopped him, he was immediately remorseful, she said. She told him it was already forgotten. In their next lesson, Brodsky told her that he shared what had happened with a therapist, who advised that while his behavior had been inappropriate, she had overreacted.

“I was speechless,” the woman said. “I felt the opposite, that it was anything but overreacting.”

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All four of the women said they never told Curtis administrators what had happened.

St. John has shared her allegations with administrators in the decades since she left the school. Most recently, in 2013 she detailed her accusations in a letter to Roberto Diaz, president and CEO of the institute, which has an international student body that ranges from preteens to young adults. The Curtis board of directors in turn hired Morgan Lewis, a Philadelphia law firm, to investigate.

Curtis administrators declined to release the firm's findings to The Inquirer or to St. John. The Inquirer independently obtained [a copy of the four-page report](#).

» ***READ MORE: Before announcing review of sexual assault policies, Curtis Institute response to claim: Don't talk about it***

The Morgan Lewis attorney who conducted the investigation appears to have interviewed only two people, Fitzpatrick and the school's former director, Gary Graffman. The men were asked general questions about sexual misconduct involving faculty members and students but not told specifically about St. John's allegations. St. John and Brodsky were not mentioned by name.



INQUIRER FILE PHOTO

Former Curtis Institute Director Gary Graffman in 1988. Graffman, now 90, continues to teach at the school.

St. John was not interviewed. Neither were the friends who witnessed the meeting with Fitzpatrick.

There was no attempt to contact other Brodsky students or any other students at Curtis.

“We have followed the leads available in relation to the allegations before us, and do not believe that further investigation is warranted,” the attorney, John C. Dodds, wrote.

The Curtis’s response stands in contrast to that of some other elite private schools when faced with old allegations of abuse. For instance, [Choate Rosemary Hall](#) in Connecticut made a point of alerting alumni that accusations had been made against former faculty, urged others with knowledge of past abuse to come forward, and made its final report public. In this region, administrators at [Germantown’s Greene Street Friends School](#) in 2017 reached out to alumni to alert them about an abusive teacher on staff decades before, saying they did not believe he committed any misconduct while employed there but could not be certain.

Diaz has defended the school’s response, describing the investigation as independent, transparent, and thorough. But he said it was hindered by the time that had passed and stressed that the school’s primary concern is “ensuring the safety and security of all current and future students.”



MICHAEL BRYANT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Roberto Diaz, president and CEO of the Curtis Institute, is a former student of the school.

“In an impartial investigation both victims and the accused would be interviewed,” Diaz said in a statement. “Unfortunately, Mr. Brodsky died 16 years before this investigation began. It is only one of the difficulties in looking back at something that happened more than three decades ago.”

The world of classical music — with intense pressures placed on musicians, and adulation of those in authority — has been ripe for potential abuse. It has weathered its share of #MeToo scandals involving powerful men, including former Metropolitan Opera artistic director James Levine, former Cleveland Orchestra concertmaster William Preucil, and former Philadelphia Orchestra chief conductor Charles Dutoit.

St. John said that in that climate, she now feels a responsibility to tell her story, if only because her success may provide a protection not afforded less established musicians who have suffered similar abuse.

“I do have means. I do have recourse. I do have resources,” she said. “How many people don’t who are now in that same situation?”

St. John was born in Ontario, Canada, studied in Philadelphia as a teen, and currently lives in New York City. At 25, she released the first of what is now more than a dozen albums. The collection of solo Bach compositions drew attention for its quality and its cover: a photo, tame by today’s standards, of St. John naked but for her strategically placed violin. She continues to be known as a maverick who often selects nontraditional works and features her beloved, four-foot pet iguana prominently on her website.

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Lara St. John



STRINGS MAGAZINE  
Lara St. John on the cover of Strings magazine.

Brodsky is among the most revered teachers in the Curtis Institute's history. His family, when told of the accusations against him, released a statement in which he was described as "elderly and frail at the time of the alleged misconduct."

"He cannot comment, let alone defend himself against these accusations," the statement continued. "Surviving family members, however, are all emphatic in their belief that the allegations are completely inconsistent with the man we knew and loved. Likewise, the allegations do not fit with Jascha's professional reputation or many personal stories we have been told by his students and colleagues for well over half a century."

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The Russian-born violinist came to Curtis as a student in his early 20s and taught there for the better part of five decades.

His impact is felt throughout the classical music world, and in particular in Philadelphia. In addition to his work at Curtis, Brodsky in 1943 helped to found the New School of Music, which maintained a prestigious faculty roster for several decades and in 1986 merged with Temple University. Jeffrey Cornelius, former dean of Temple's music school, where Brodsky also taught, said he never received any complaints about Brodsky.



**FILE PHOTO**

Brodsky was a founding member of the Curtis String Quartet, pictured here with Samuel Barber in 1936 in Rome. From left: Orlando Cole, Jascha Brodsky, Samuel Barber, Max Aronoff and Charles Joffe.

As a violinist, Brodsky was a much-admired founding member of the Curtis String Quartet, which, for a half century starting in 1932, helped to set the standard for American string quartets through its tours and recordings.

Nearly a dozen members of the Philadelphia Orchestra studied with Brodsky. So did violinists with the Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, and Los Angeles Philharmonic. Among his most famous pupils are violinists Leila Josefowicz and Hilary Hahn, who have gone on to wide acclaim. The two musicians told *The Inquirer* they have nothing but fond memories of their instructor.

“He was a wonderful teacher, and I learned a tremendous amount from him musically and professionally,” Hahn, who studied with Brodsky from 1990 until his death, said in a statement.

The Inquirer spoke to more than 30 other Brodsky students who studied with him from the 1950s through 1990s, as well as faculty and administrators who knew him. They described Brodsky as demanding, with a style that some found intimidating, others sternly supportive. Many said he was known to take students to dinner, and use terms of endearment such as “sweetie pie” and “darling,” but never in a way they said made them uncomfortable.

Many of Brodsky’s former students said he was a pivotal, positive force in their careers. They expressed shock that he had been accused of misconduct.

“He was a tough teacher, certainly,” said Alexandra Cutler-Fetkewicz, who studied with Brodsky, starting as a preteen, at a Temple University program for gifted young musicians. “But never, ever did he do anything untoward, ... certainly not a sexual advance or an abusive nature.”



COURTESY LARA ST. JOHN

Lara St. John and her brother play music together as children in their house in London, Ontario, as their mother accompanies them on the piano. Lara was around 4 years old in this 1975 photograph.

## ‘Shocked and horrified’

St. John remembers taking naturally to the violin, the way children instinctively pick up their first words and turn them into a sentence without prompting. From that start, she had perfect pitch and an incredible memory for music.

Her talent was recognized early. At age 4, St. John was a soloist in her first concerto. At 9, she won Canada's national music competition. At 10, she made her European debut in Lisbon and began to tour internationally.

Her brother, Scott, was a violin prodigy as well and often performed with her. Audiences soaked up the brother-sister duo.

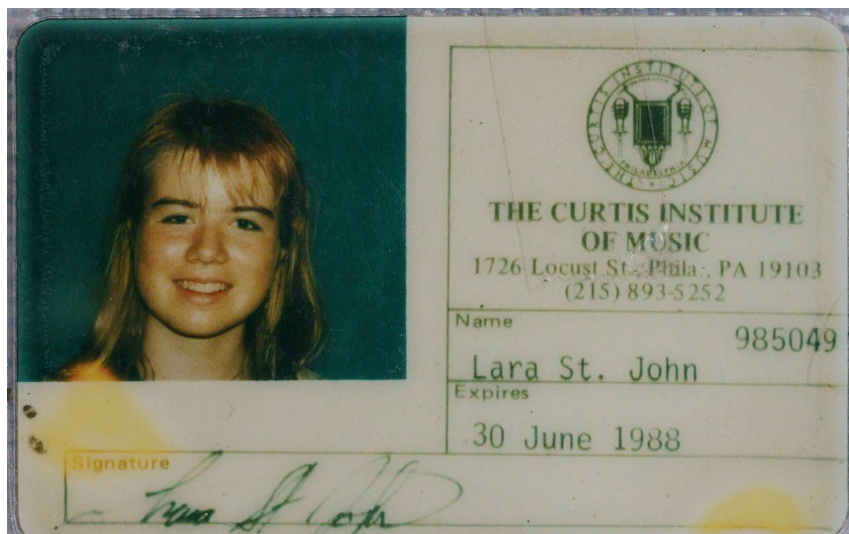


COURTESY LARA ST. JOHN

Lara St. John and her brother perform together with Orchestra London, in Ontario, in 1978. Lara was 6 in this photo.

A year older, her brother was accepted to Curtis in 1984. St. John auditioned and was accepted the following year. They had been welcomed into one of the most selective schools of higher education, with an acceptance rate around 4 percent. It is tuition-free for its students, about 175 in total. The school was founded in 1924 in the Rittenhouse Square brownstone mansion that belonged to the family that owned Curtis Publishing Co. Curtis graduates have populated chairs in orchestras around the world, including the Berlin Philharmonic, the Royal Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, and most if not all major U.S. orchestras. Two New York Philharmonic music directors were trained at Curtis, and the school counts among its graduates winners of Pulitzer Prizes, Guggenheim Fellowships, and Grammy and Tony Awards.

St. John arrived at age 14. Brodsky, who was 78, was one of her two instructors. He had taught her the prior summer at an Ohio music camp. From the start, she remembers, he showered her with praise, calling her his favorite student. For St. John, who took a particular interest in Eastern European music, it was a dream to receive such compliments from a man with Brodsky's musical pedigree.

**COURTESY LARA ST. JOHN**

Lara St. John was accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music at age 13, and entered at 14. She was enrolled for three years.

At Curtis, she had lessons with Brodsky about three times a month. Early on, she remembers Brodsky asking her to visit his office at the New School in the evenings after their sessions. Once he suggested they listen to music together. Instead, he sat near her on the couch and told her stories of his career.

He always locked the door behind her when she arrived, she said.

In time, he began to kiss her and touch her under her clothing during her visits, she said. As the abuse accelerated, St. John remembers Brodsky suggesting that it would be a shame if she and her brother had to leave the school. She took it as a threat should she refuse his advances. At the time, she was more concerned for her brother's career than her own.

"I didn't want that kind of shame to be brought onto my brother through no fault of his own. And I believed [Brodsky]," she said. "I'll never forgive myself for that."

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St. John said the abuse continued, about every other week, for about six months and culminated in Brodsky's raping her. She was 14. She said after that she refused to let him touch her again, standing in the corner of the room when she played to put as much space between them as possible.

Every lesson, Brodsky would ask why she did not love him anymore, she said.

After summer break, St. John returned to Philadelphia in a perilous mental state for her second year at Curtis. She began to cancel lessons, not wanting to see Brodsky. She eventually opened up to two friends, sharing some of what had happened.



Lara St. John, violin, and Matt Herskowitz, piano, perform live at WGBH Studios in Boston

“She said he asked her to take her shirt off and felt her breasts,” said Eric Zivian, a former Curtis student who now lives in California and continues to play and compose. “I was shocked.”

Carolyn Kalhorn said that while St. John did not explicitly say she had been raped, she shared enough that it was easy to infer that is what had happened.

“I was like, Is what you’re telling me what I think you’re telling me?” Kalhorn, now a musician with the Paris Opera, said. “And I just remember being so shocked and horrified.”

The three went together to Fitzpatrick.

St. John, who was then 15, said she felt guilty asking for a new teacher, having been raised to shoulder problems without complaint. She said she stopped short of telling Fitzpatrick that she had been raped but did say that Brodsky had touched her beneath her clothing and performed sexual acts on her.

Zivian and Kalhorn said that, three decades on, they don’t recall what details St. John shared. But both stand firm that St. John made it clear that she had been sexually abused.

Both said Fitzpatrick was dismissive.

“He scoffed, is really the word, [and said] ‘Who is going to believe you?’ ” Kalthorn said. “I remember Eric saying, ‘We’ll go to the police.’ And him saying, ‘Yeah? Go ahead.’ ”

She said Fitzpatrick asked them who was more likely to be believed: three kids, or a respected member of the faculty.

“He scoffed, is really the word, [and said] ‘Who is going to believe you?’”

Carolyn Kalthorn

“He said Mr. Brodsky is an asset to the department,” Zivian recalled.

Fitzpatrick remembers the meeting differently. By his recollection, St. John came to him alone, though he later acknowledged it was possible she brought friends with her. He said she complained that Brodsky was too “touchy,” and it made her uncomfortable. (Fitzpatrick declined to elaborate but said that, in general, teachers often touch students during lessons to help with positioning. He also said Brodsky was known to kiss students on the cheek after lessons.) He said St. John never told him she was being abused, nor did he tell her that people would believe Brodsky over her.

Fitzpatrick said he asked her what she wanted him to do, and she responded: “I just want you to know.”

“I have no idea what the others heard, but I know what I understood,” he said. “And I’m not saying what I understood was appropriate. But that there was sexual abuse? No. No.”

Still, Fitzpatrick said he asked Gary Graffman, the school’s director, to have his wife, Naomi, speak with Lara, believing the teen should speak to a woman. St. John remembers Naomi Graffman inviting her to tea about a week later. Graffman said she would be getting a new teacher, St. John said, then suggested the matter should not be discussed further.



Gary Graffman is the former director of the Curtis Institute of Music and a current member of the faculty. Lara St. John said his wife, Naomi Graffman (left), took her to tea shortly after she reported being abused by her teacher.

Naomi Graffman died in June. She was in poor health before her death and unavailable to be interviewed for this story. Her husband continues to teach at the Curtis at age 90. He said he recalls Naomi meeting with St. John but does not believe his wife was aware of the extent of the alleged abuse.

Graffman said that while he knew St. John had requested a new teacher, he believed it was because Brodsky had perhaps patted her backside, or something similar, but nothing more egregious.

“[Lara] did not come to talk to me about anything,” Graffman said. “I guess I put it out of my mind, that it couldn’t have been that important.”

St. John, too, tried to put it behind her. She memorized Brodsky’s schedule, hoping to avoid running into him in the halls. Occasionally, she still did.

In her third and final year at Curtis, she said, she became overwhelmed by shame over what had happened and attempted suicide. A few months later, she left the school at age 17, turning down the opportunity to continue her studies.

Her brother, Scott, continued to have lessons with Brodsky, unaware of what had prompted his sister to seek a

“[Lara] did not come to talk to me about anything. I guess I put it out of my mind, that it couldn’t have been that important.”

Former Curtis director Gary Graffman

new teacher.

“I’d go in there and look at him and think, ‘What happened?’” he said.  
“None of it made sense to me.”

## Told to keep it secret

After leaving Curtis, St. John moved to the then-Soviet Union to study at the Moscow Conservatory.

Aleksandar Madzar, a fellow student, remembered that she would go silent when others shared stories about their teachers. Madzar said that once when the subject came up, St. John told him to “not even mention Brodsky because something very, very bad happened.”

He assumed she was alluding to a sexual trauma.

“She was fleeing something, that’s clear,” he said.

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In 1991, after a few years abroad, St. John moved to New York. She was 20. Over the coming years, she worked in a bar, bought an apartment, and practiced ferociously.

She tried to forget Brodsky.

“When I thought about it, I forced myself not to because I thought that was weak. And I thought it was just something that’s in the past,” she said.  
“And you know, I was happy. I had made a new life.”

Then came a phone call in December 1995. On the other end of the line was a woman named Mary-Jean Hayden, who worked at Curtis as a counselor to foreign students, St. John said. Hayden knew St. John from her time at the school and now was calling because she had heard that something had happened to her while a student.

St. John did not know what prompted the call but told her everything.



**JASCHA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

St. John, photographed during a May performance in Richmond Va., tried to not think about what had happened at the Curtis Institute in the years after she left the school, believing dwelling on it made her weak.

After hanging up with Hayden, St. John said she called a friend and fellow violinist, Louise Owen. Owen is the fifth person in the world to be classified as having Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM), which allows her to vividly remember each day of her life, along with what she did. She has been featured on [numerous news shows including 60 Minutes](#) and been studied by neuroscientists at the University of California Irvine.

Owen remembers St. John calling her on the evening of Dec. 3, 1995, a Sunday. Through tears, St. John told her of the call from Hayden.

“Lara was just inconsolable on the other end of the phone,” Owen said. “She said: ‘It’s bringing all of this up. I’ve tried to get beyond it, but it brought it all back.’ I had never heard her sound like that.”

Hayden, who is in her 80s, recently told a reporter that she did not recall the conversation with St. John. She said she struggles with memory loss.

The day after her conversation with Hayden, St. John said, her phone rang again. It was Naomi Graffman, who a decade earlier had taken her to tea and urged her not to discuss Brodsky with others. St. John said Graffman made the request again.

Besides, St. John remembers Graffman assuring her, Brodsky was only teaching one student and would likely die soon.

## Injustice roars back

For the second time, St. John had agreed to keep her story to herself. She said she took no convincing; she had wanted to tuck it away.

That changed in 2012 when she heard through a friend that an administrator at the school had questioned why she never donated to Curtis.

“That’s true,” she wrote to the administrator in an email shared with The Inquirer. “I thought I’d tell you why. I’m not going to pull any punches.”

St. John detailed the alleged abuse. She asked the administrator, Anne O’Donnell, to not share the message. It is not known what O’Donnell did with the information. She declined to comment for this story.

Two months later, Fitzpatrick, then no longer at Curtis, published an article on a popular classical music blog under the attention-grabbing title “[When Curtis was known as the Coitus Institute.](#)” It offered advice on how student abuse should be handled in music schools.

“Like the Catholic Church, music schools tended to sweep their dirty little secrets under the rug,” Fitzpatrick wrote of the early days of American conservatories. “Students were never willing to discuss the improper actions of their instructors because of fear of reprisal that could sink their career as a performer.”

St. John said she “saw red.”

“The injustice just came roaring back,” she said. “And there he is, living the high life in Paris, making himself out to be like this savior of students.”

She ultimately drafted the letter to Curtis president Diaz, sent in August 2013, laying out everything that had transpired, from the abuse by Brodsky, to her meeting with Fitzpatrick, and her conversations with Naomi Graffman.

“Like the Catholic Church, music schools tended to sweep their dirty little secrets under the rug.”

Former Curtis dean Robert Fitzpatrick

Her goal, she said, was simple: to ensure Fitzpatrick never again positioned himself as an expert on child abuse, and to let Curtis' administration and board know how Fitzpatrick had disregarded her concerns.



ED HILLE / FILE PHOTO

Robert Fitzpatrick, shown here at the Curtis, was the school's dean for more than two decades. He retired in 2009 and now lives in Paris.

Diaz, who studied at the school and knew both Brodsky and St. John, said in an interview that he was stunned by the letter. He said he took it immediately to the board of directors. (The late H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, who at the time was co-owner of the Inquirer and later became the paper's sole-owner, was chairman of the Curtis Institute board at the time.) The board's governance committee hired Morgan Lewis attorney John Dodds to investigate.

The resulting investigation focused largely on the school's current obligations — both legal and to its students — and not St. John's claims. Curtis officials asked Dodds to weigh whether it had a legal responsibility to notify the police (Dodds said it did not), whether there was any threat to the welfare of current students (he said there was not), and whether Curtis should update its policies and procedures (he recommended minor changes.)

To investigate St. John's claims, Dodds called only Fitzpatrick and Graffman. He spoke to both about Fitzpatrick's blog post but did not mention St. John or Brodsky by name. Dodds wrote that he made the decision "in deference to St. John's wishes" and that St. John had refused to talk to him for the investigation. Dodds did not respond to a request to comment for this story.

Stephen Judson, St. John's husband and manager, communicated with Dodds on her behalf at the time. In a recent interview, he said he asked Dodds to put any questions for St. John through him, but made clear they were willing to help in his investigation. He said Dodds never posed any questions, including to ask for the names of the two friends who went with her to Fitzpatrick's office. He also disputed that St. John requested to remain anonymous.

After recently reviewing the report, Judson said it seemed Curtis officials did not want Dodds to seriously investigate St. John's claims.

"I think they were more concerned with, Will there be a police report? Will it go public? Is this in some way going to hurt us legally or economically? Which is unfortunate, because that is not where this was coming from," he said. "She approached it with sincerity, and I think their approach has been quite cynical."

Attorney Sheldon Bonovitz, chairman of the school's governance committee at the time, said that was far from the case. In a statement, he said the committee specifically asked Morgan Lewis to "proceed wherever the investigation took it."

"There were expressly no requested or suggested limitations on its investigation," he wrote.

Beyond hiring Morgan Lewis to investigate, Curtis administrators took one other step in response to St. John's letter.

They asked Fitzpatrick to stop writing about child abuse.

An attorney writing on the school's behalf said that his blog post had "prompted a private response from a former Curtis student making an allegation that some years ago you were at the center of a very serious incident involving her which you neither reported nor appropriately handled." The lawyer said it was "imperative, from Curtis' perspective," that he stop writing or speaking on the subject.

Fitzpatrick, in his response, made no such promise. "My conscience is clear," he wrote.

"I know of one case which resembles your description which I did report to my superior at the time (in the 1980s) which could be described as harassment of a female student by a faculty member," he went on. "To my knowledge, action was taken in the form of a reprimand and the activity ceased."

"I trust that this matter is now closed."

That continues to be Fitzpatrick's position. After initially taking questions for this story, he ended the conversation by saying that he would engage a lawyer if contacted by The Inquirer again. Later emailed a description of what this story would report, Fitzpatrick said he had no additional comment.

## A long-awaited visit

On a warm day in late June, St. John took the train from New York to Philadelphia and slowly walked the streets of Rittenhouse, her former neighborhood. She came hoping to expel something, the emotions that for the last 34 years have caused her to cringe at even the mention of this city, or the school where she studied.

She walked past the first-floor apartment where she once lived, by the bay window where she would look out as she practiced.

Outside the former New School, she pointed up at the office that had been Brodsky's, then without hesitation walked up the steps, knocked on the door of what is now a private home, and had a brief conversation with the person who answered.

In the lobby of the hotel where she had tea with Naomi Graffman, St. John marveled that she remembered the ceiling being so much higher.

"It's because I was little," she said.

A few months before, she had come to Philadelphia to visit friends and strategically stayed east of Broad Street, avoiding these places.

Somehow, it felt easier now.

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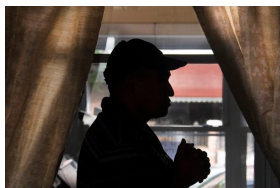


ERICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

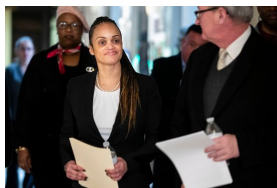
St. John walks down Spruce Street, near the apartment where she lived as a student at the Curtis Institute, during a June visit to Philadelphia.

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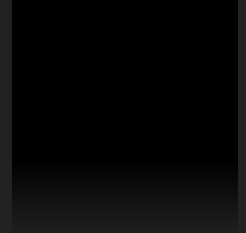
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