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Jeffrey Epstein's New York Hunting Ground: Dance Studios

The financier recruited young dancers to give him erotic massages even after his 2008 conviction for soliciting prostitution from a minor.



Image [REDACTED] was asked if she would become Jeffrey Epstein's personal trainer. Credit Credit Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

By **Ali Watkins**
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██████ was 17 when a fellow dancer approached her after a ballet class in 2002 and asked if she wanted to give private exercise classes to a wealthy man named Jeffrey Epstein.

Another dancer, ██████ received a similar pitch in 2006 from a woman, this time to give Mr. Epstein a massage.

The same year, a third dancer, ██████ was asked if she would become his personal trainer.

At the time, Mr. Epstein was exploiting dozens of girls he had plucked from high schools and shopping malls in Florida, luring them to his Palm Beach mansion and coercing them into giving him erotic massages through false promises, cash payments and threats, according to court records.

But in New York City, Mr. Epstein had a different hunting ground: dance studios.

The scope of Mr. Epstein's sex trafficking in Manhattan has become clearer as several lawsuits have been filed against his estate in the days since he was found dead from [a suicide in his jail cell in Manhattan](#), where he had been awaiting trial on federal sex-trafficking charges.

The suits say that when Mr. Epstein was luring teenagers into sexual exploitation in Florida, he was using a network of recruiters within New York City's dance studios to procure aspiring performers into a similar scheme.

Not even a 13-month stint in jail in 2008 and 2009 stopped him, recently filed lawsuits say. While in jail, Mr. Epstein arranged for two women he had recruited in New York to be flown to Florida, where he pressured them into sex [while he was on work release](#), the court papers said.

The United States attorney in Manhattan is continuing to investigate people close to Mr. Epstein whom prosecutors have said he relied on to feed his appetite for girls, including a half-dozen employees, girlfriends and associates. It remains unclear if the people who recruited girls from dance studios are under scrutiny.

Mr. Epstein's activities in Manhattan apparently did not cross the radar of the New York police. "None of it sounds remotely familiar to me," said Michael Bock, the former supervising sergeant for the Manhattan bureau of the Police Department's Special Victims Division. "I don't recall ever even seeing his name across my desk."

Mr. Epstein's network of recruiters in dance studios was described in the lawsuits filed earlier this month in Federal District Court in Manhattan by two women who say they were sexually exploited by Mr. Epstein, and in interviews with two dancers who had dealings with him in New York.

These women said Mr. Epstein took advantage of the insularity of the dance world, where dancers rely on one another for job opportunities and trust that those tips are legitimate.

"There's some sort of level of trust with people through ballet studios," said ██████, a former dancer who said she was recruited at ██████ to be a personal trainer to Mr. Epstein by another woman at a dance studio in 2013. "There is that kind of inherent trust, we're all part of the same community. You wouldn't share that kind of unsafe opportunity with someone."

██████ whose last name was not revealed in court papers, said in her complaint that she was recruited by a fellow dancer at her studio and that she accepted an opportunity to make money giving private exercise lessons to Mr. Epstein.

But when she arrived days later at Mr. Epstein's palatial townhouse on East 71st Street, she found her patron was not interested in a dance workout, according to a lawsuit. Instead, Mr. Epstein quizzed her on her dance aspirations, promised to buy her new point shoes and asked her to take part in several sexually charged stretching activities.

On her third visit, Mr. Epstein asked for a massage, during which he assaulted her with a sex toy and masturbated, the complaint said. He implied ██████ dance career would be over if she did not go along.

Afterward, he gave her \$300 and the book "Massage for Dummies." It was the start of an eight-year cycle of abuse.

The lawsuits name as defendants Mr. Epstein's estate and eight companies that the plaintiffs claim assisted Mr. Epstein in his sex trafficking, including by serving as fronts for procuring young women and paying associates who helped him.

The suits are among at least six complaints filed in Manhattan against Mr. Epstein's estate and his close associates since he died by suicide on Aug. 10, all saying he forced girls and young women into sexual servitude.

One woman, ██████ said in a suit that she was ██████ in 2001 when a woman recruited her outside her high school. She was groomed over time, she said, and was eventually pressured to give Mr. Epstein erotic massages at his townhouse.

A year later, she said, he raped her during one of those encounters. She had been an aspiring actress. Mr. Epstein's lawyers declined to address the allegations. They have [pointed out in court](#) that no one has accused Mr. Epstein of abusing underage girls since his conviction in 2008, when he struck a widely criticized plea bargain with prosecutors in Florida that shielded him from federal sex-trafficking charges.

Under that deal, Mr. Epstein pleaded guilty to two state charges, including soliciting a minor for prostitution. He served a 13-month sentence in a Florida jail, but was permitted to leave for 12 hours a day, six days a week.

Two of the lawsuits say that Mr. Epstein used his time on work release to have sex with at least two of the young women he had recruited in New York.

One, identified in court papers as ██████ said Mr. Epstein flew her to Florida during his imprisonment and had sex with her at his mansion while he was wearing an ankle monitor.

██████ said in court papers that she had been drawn into his world two years earlier, at age ██████ Her experience after she was offered a job as a masseuse closely tracked patterns described by his accusers in other lawsuits.

The first two visits, she had just given him massages and received payments. After that, however, Mr. Epstein began assaulting her sexually with his hands and sex toys, telling her that he had resources that he would use to advance her dancing career "if she would do what he wanted to do."

In 2007, ██████ flew to Mr. Epstein's private island in the Caribbean and posted about the trip on social media, the lawsuit said. The next morning, Mr. Epstein was furious, held her down by her wrists and threatened her safety if she ever told anyone about what she knew of his activities.

After that, she "was in fear for her safety and her life and knew that strict compliance with the dictates of this very powerful man was required as a condition of maintaining her safety." Mr. Epstein continued to coerce her into sex until 2010, the lawsuit said.

Another woman, identified only as ██████ said in a lawsuit that she was introduced to Mr. Epstein through her sister, who was working for him. She said Mr. Epstein promised repeatedly that he would help pay \$20,000 for a critical medical procedure she needed if she complied with his sexual demands. She continued to engage in sex acts with him for money until 2014.

Mr. Epstein was accused in the suits of sexually exploiting the women until they looked less like teenagers. Mr. Epstein then allegedly sought to turn two of the women into recruiters, urging ██████ "to go to her dance studio and find other dancers." Another he pushed to become a trained masseuse. The recruitments of ██████ echo the experience of ██████, a dance instructor who said in an interview that she was recruited to provide private lessons to Mr. Epstein in New York around 2006.

██████ who is now based in ██████ and manages her own dance business, said a woman she met in a bar took interest in her dance career and said she knew a wealthy man looking for a personal trainer. ██████ who was in her early 20s at the time and new to New York City, took the job.

When she arrived at Mr. Epstein's townhouse, he did not want to exercise but seemed interested in bizarre stretching maneuvers. During one session, ██████ said, Mr. Epstein suggested she could massage his testicles to help with flexibility.

"He was like, 'You know, my Russian ballet instructor, she massages my testicles because it helps my flexibility,'" ██████ recalled. "I said, 'O.K., I can't do that for you.'"

██████ said she worked for Mr. Epstein for a only few weeks, and was also asked to give classes to two teenagers living in one of his apartments, whom he called "my girls." ██████ said the

arrangement ended after she refused Mr. Epstein's suggestive proposals. "It certainly wasn't for personal training," she said of the classes.



Image

New lawsuits say that Mr. Epstein sought dancers from Manhattan studios, including Steps on Broadway, to give him massages and private exercise classes. CreditMark Abramson for The New York Times

██████████ a former dancer, said Mr. Epstein tried to recruit her to give him dance lessons in 2013. She was ██████████ but looked younger. A young-looking woman approached her in the bathroom of the Steps on Broadway dance studio and said she was looking for someone to take over one of her private ballet clients.

██████████ agreed to speak to the potential student through Skype and was surprised when the person on the screen was an older man who wanted to fly her to Florida for lessons. The man told her that he was a registered sex offender and asked her to do an internet search for his name, Jeffrey Epstein, before she committed to the job.

"I never talked to him again," ██████████ said.

Gia Kourlas contributed reporting. Susan Beachy and Sheelagh McNeill contributed research.