

For Lori Loughlin, 'parenting on steroids' could be a defense in the college admissions scandal

By RICHARD WINTON and HANNAH FRY

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Actress Lori Loughlin, front, and husband, clothing designer Massimo Giannulli, rear, depart federal court in Boston on Wednesday, April 3, 2019, after facing charges in a nationwide college admissions bribery scandal. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa) (Charles Krupa / AP)

Lori Loughlin and her husband, fashion designer J. Massimo Giannulli, are vowing to fight charges accusing them of participating in an elaborate fraud to get their children into college.

Their attorneys have not revealed much about their legal strategy. But as more parents file court papers, one argument is coming into focus: They were just trying to help their kids and were manipulated into criminal activity. That is far from a bulletproof defense given the wiretapped records and payments prosecutors have

outlined in court papers.

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But some legal experts say it's a start.

“These are parents trying to help their kids. Yes, it is parenting on steroids,” said Lara Yeretsian, a criminal defense attorney who was part of the legal team for both Scott Peterson and Michael Jackson.

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Loughlin and Giannulli are accused of paying \$500,000 to have their two daughters admitted to USC as crew recruits. Though neither is a rower, the parents saw being a coxswain as their daughters' ticket into the private college, according to an affidavit filed in federal court. USC's admissions rate is 13%.

They began discussing the plot with William "Rick" Singer in April 2016 after they met with the college counselor of their older daughter, Isabella, according to the affidavit.

"I'd like to maybe sit with you after your session with the girls as I have some concerns and want to fully understand the game plan and make sure we have a roadmap for success as it relates to [our daughter] and getting her into a school other than ASU!" Giannulli allegedly wrote to Singer.

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Singer told the couple that Isabella's academic qualifications were "at or just below the low end of USC's admission," according to the affidavit.

Authorities allege the couple agreed to take advantage of what Singer called his "side door" into the university by bribing USC senior associate athletic director Donna Heinel to designate their daughter as an athletic recruit on the crew team. Heinel is also charged in the scheme and has pleaded not guilty.

The money that authorities say eventually made its way to college coaches involved in the scam was funneled through Singer's charity, whose stated mission was to help "underprivileged students." This allowed some of the parents to write off the bribes as donations on their taxes, authorities said.

After their older daughter's admission was secured, they repeated the scam in 2017 with their younger daughter, Olivia Jade, authorities allege. Singer allegedly told the couple he would present their daughter as a crew coxswain for the L.A. Marina Club team and requested they send an "action picture." The couple sent him a photo of Olivia Jade rowing on a machine, according to the affidavit.

Yeretsian said the couple's lawyers could play on the fact that Singer masterminded the scheme, that they were introduced to him as a college consultant and that, as an expert, he was persuasive. He was the villain here, they could argue.

“The key will be explaining the \$500,000,” she said. That's far more than the \$15,000 actress Felicity Huffman allegedly paid Singer. Huffman has agreed to plead guilty.

Legal experts have said the two actresses face different legal jeopardy because Loughlin paid a good deal more than Huffman. Despite her guilty plea, Huffman faces a real possibility of some prison time, the experts said.

“The problem here is Felicity Huffman has taken a deal that includes jail time on its face. It doesn't put Lori Loughlin ... in a good place to negotiate,” L.A. defense attorney Louis Shapiro said last week.

The couple's lawyers could paint Singer as the bad guy, luring the innocent, good-hearted parents into a world of bribes, Yeretsian said.

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Whether that strategy would work in court is an open question, depending in part on how the jury and judge see the evidence and the actions of the parents.

Whether they ultimately risk it, she said, and move to trial may depend on whether prosecutors try to go after their children. So far, prosecutors have placed no clear evidence in the record that either child knew what their parents were doing. But prosecutors allege they posed for pictures of them rowing that helped with their entrance to college.

In announcing she would plead guilty, Huffman took pains to make clear her daughter didn't know.

"I am ashamed of the pain I have caused my daughter, my family, my friends, my colleagues and the educational community," she said in a statement. "My daughter knew absolutely nothing about my actions, and in my misguided and profoundly wrong way, I have betrayed her."

Davina Isackson and Bruce Isackson, the president of a Bay Area real estate firm, were accused of paying a college admissions consultant \$600,000 to get one daughter into UCLA and another into USC through bribes and other deceitful acts, court records show.

They also pleaded guilty and the parents expressed remorse.

"No words can express how profoundly sorry we are for what we have done. Our duty as parents was to set a good example for our children, and instead we have harmed and embarrassed them by our misguided decisions," they said in a joint statement. "We have worked cooperatively with the prosecutors and will continue to do so as we take full responsibility for our bad judgment."

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While Huffman and a dozen other parents agreed to admit their guilt in the far-reaching scandal, many of the 16 other parents named in the scam are mounting their legal defense.

A Palo Alto couple accused of paying \$25,000 to rig their son's college entrance exam asked a federal judge this week to dismiss the indictment against them, claiming there was no conspiracy among the parents entangled in the college admissions scandal.

Their defense attorney, David S. Schumacher, argued in the motion that even if it were true that his clients paid a test proctor to correct their son's SAT exam, as authorities have alleged, they did not act in concert with other parents. In that case, Schumacher said, prosecutors don't have the legal ground to support the conspiracy charge.

Bill McGlashan, the former managing partner of San Francisco-based TPG Growth, is fighting allegations he discussed a \$200,000 bribe with an athletic administrator to get his son into USC.

His attorneys argued that their client differed from other parents caught up in the scandal. McGlashan, who has pleaded not guilty, says he paid Singer \$50,000 for legitimate college counseling services for his son.

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Richard Winton

Richard Winton is a crime writer for the Los Angeles Times and part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2011. Known as @lacrimas on Twitter, during 20 years at The Times he also has been part of the breaking news staff that won Pulitzers in 1998 and 2004. He won the ASNE Deadline News award in 2006. A native of England, after getting degrees from University of Kent at Canterbury and University of Wisconsin-Madison, he began covering politics but chose a life of crime because it was less dirty.

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Hannah Fry is a Metro reporter covering breaking news in California. She joined Times Community News in Orange County in 2013 where she covered education, Newport Beach city hall, crime and courts. She is a native of Orange County and attended Chapman University, where she was the editor-in-chief of the college newspaper, the Panther.

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An earlier version of this article said Lori Loughlin and J. Mossimo Giannulli allegedly paid 10 times more than Felicity Huffman did in the admissions scandal. They are accused of paying \$500,000 and Huffman, \$15,000.

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