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ADMINISTRATION

Geoff Marcy's Downfall

How the astronomer's case signals a new era of activism against sexual harassment

By *Robin Wilson* | FEBRUARY 21, 2016

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Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Geoffrey Marcy, at home in Berkeley: "Here we are talking about a hug and a kiss on the cheek from 15 years ago, and I've lost my job."

and telescopes Mr. Marcy used for his groundbreaking work on planets outside Earth's solar system.

"This is kind of bittersweet," he says, looking at a box decorated with a painting of Hawaii's Keck Observatory surrounded by a dark-blue sky flecked with stars.

The reminders of Geoffrey W. Marcy's pre-eminent career in astronomy are everywhere. In the living room of his home tucked into the rambling hills here above the University of California campus hang two large paintings of planetary systems his research group discovered.

Outside, in the terraced backyard, are red cedar boxes where Mr. Marcy's wife raises honeybees. Painted on the boxes are pictures of the famous observatories

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Mr. Marcy's lifelong work hunting for exoplanets came to a grinding halt when he was forced to step down from his professorship here last October. His abrupt resignation followed charges that he had sexually harassed young women in astronomy.

The former undergraduate students complained that, between 2001 and 2005, Mr. Marcy had put his arm around them, kissed them on the forehead and cheek, and talked about his sex life. One said that in 2010 she had witnessed him buying drinks for an undergraduate during a gathering after a meeting of the American Astronomical Society. When the undergraduate became drunk, this woman said, Mr. Marcy took the undergraduate, with a friend, back to her hotel in a taxi and up to her room. None of the women have said that the professor had sex with them.

Mr. Marcy acknowledges most of the behavior. But he says he quit doing those kinds of things years ago, after his colleagues told him it made women uncomfortable.

Mr. Marcy talked to *The Chronicle* here last month, the first time he had spoken at length publicly about the charges against him. He says he is a casualty of a hypersensitive atmosphere that turned his efforts to be caring toward women into

sexual harassment. Does touching undergraduate women in the ways he did, he asks, really warrant being banished from the field forever?

"I hope people will look back and see there were hundreds of students who loved my warm, human mentoring style," he says. "Here we are talking about a hug and a kiss on the cheek from 15 years ago, and I've lost my job."

Some of Mr. Marcy's colleagues here and many scientists outside Berkeley, however, call that characterization a disingenuous distortion. "This is a standard line he employs, a guise to allow him to do what he does and get away with it," says Aaron Parsons, an assistant professor of astronomy at Berkeley who helped guide some of the women who eventually filed complaints against Mr. Marcy. Mr. Parsons says he had long heard rumors about Mr. Marcy's inappropriate behavior — including the episode at the astronomical-society meeting — and started investigating to see if he could do anything to help stop it.

Scrutiny of sexual harassment in the sciences, and across academic disciplines, has intensified in recent years, and Mr. Marcy's case is a major marker of that. People inside higher education and out have accused colleges and universities of failing to police the problem and have begun to go around the normal institutional mechanisms for dealing with sexual harassment, calling attention to alleged perpetrators online and even on the floor of Congress. Committees on the status of women in some disciplines have also increasingly put pressure on universities to improve the climate for women in their fields.

In Mr. Marcy's case, Berkeley graduates who are now professors at other institutions or who work outside academe, and scholars on the astronomical society's Committee on the Status of Women, all had a role in encouraging former students to file the complaints that touched off an investigation at Berkeley. The university determined last year that the professor had violated its sexual-harassment policy, and administrators told Mr. Marcy that if he did anything

problematic again, he could be suspended.

The field of astronomy erupted when all that became public a few months later. Many considered Berkeley's treatment of Mr. Marcy to be far too lenient. An online petition supporting people who "were targets of Geoff Marcy's inappropriate behavior" gathered more than 3,000 signatures. His colleagues issued a statement criticizing Berkeley for how it had handled the case and urging Mr. Marcy to leave. Finally, the professor felt forced to step down.

"I don't think anyone thinks public shaming is the best way to deal with harassment," says Ruth Murray-Clay, an assistant professor of physics at the University of California at Santa Barbara who earned a Ph.D. in astrophysics at Berkeley in 2008. Ms. Murray-Clay says that undergraduate women at Berkeley complained to her about Mr. Marcy's behavior while she was a graduate student there, and that she spoke to Mr. Marcy about it several times. She says he told her he would change, but he never did. "Going outside the institution to draw attention to the problem was the last resort in this case," she says. "It was the only thing left."

Since Mr. Marcy stepped down at Berkeley last year, several other universities have faced public scrutiny over their handling of science professors found responsible for sexual harassment. Timothy F. Slater, an astronomer who holds an endowed chair at the University of Wyoming, was publicly criticized by a U.S. congresswoman last month for sexually harassing female students at a previous university, including making lewd comments and inviting one student to a strip club for lunch. Christian Ott, an astrophysics professor, was suspended for the current academic year after the California Institute of Technology found him responsible for sexually harassing and discriminating against two female graduate students. And Jason Lieb, a molecular

biologist, left the University of Chicago last month as it was preparing to fire him for making unwelcome sexual advances toward female graduate students at an off-campus gathering.

"When you're talking about these people who have done something bad, some say, 'But he was a Nobel Prize winner, he's an important scientist,'" says C. Megan Urry, a professor of astronomy at Yale University who is president of the astronomical society. "But what if you had an important scientist in that position who behaved well? Maybe the whole enterprise would have been much more productive."

Like many young people, Mr. Marcy says he found science difficult and at times questioned his own abilities as both a student and a postdoc. He says he learned firsthand that a friendly word and a friendly touch could go a long way toward reassuring students. At the end of his second year in graduate school, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, as he sat studying for a preliminary exam to determine if he could be admitted into the Ph.D. program, a male professor came into his office and put an arm around him. "He said, 'Geoff, let me just tell you, you're gonna make it,'" says Mr. Marcy. "The touching felt genuine and that he was on my side."

That was 40 years ago, but it left an impression. "I could tell that many professors didn't really care about the human aspect of their teaching," says Mr. Marcy. "I thought, I would like to make the experience for my students human, welcoming, and warm."

After he finished his Ph.D., he secured a prominent postdoctoral fellowship with the Carnegie Institution of Washington where, in 1983, he developed a technique that would lead to his fame in the field. It allowed him to detect planets that may

be orbiting other stars — outside Earth's solar system — and involved watching whether those stars were "wobbling," which Mr. Marcy deduced could be due to the gravitational pull of an orbiting planet.

While Mr. Marcy didn't discover the first confirmed planet outside Earth's solar system (a group of Swiss scientists did in 1995), he identified most of the next 100 exoplanets, as they are known. By now, more than 4,500 have been discovered.

His work has made him well known in astronomy and brought in hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants. He likens himself to a trans-Atlantic explorer, on the hunt for a new world. Only his territory was outer space.

Mr. Marcy says he developed a particular interest in supporting women after a former high-school girlfriend told him she had been raped in college. He joined a group called Men Against Rape when he was a graduate student at Santa Cruz, and on weekends he would meet with high-school boys to talk about how to treat women.

His interest continued into the classroom, where he says many female students felt isolated and unwelcome. As a professor, he says, he made sure women "got a fair shake" and felt supported. That involved policing classroom discussions, he says, ensuring that male students didn't hog the limelight and talk over female students. In the lab, he says, it was his job to say: "Let's make sure everyone gets equal access to the oscilloscope."

Mr. Marcy made it his business to share not only in students' academic concerns but also in their personal struggles. In part, he says, that's because students frequently talked to him about their families and partners, rarely confining their conversations to astronomy. "I didn't want to say, Oh, your mom's sick? Who cares?" he says. And students, he says, responded to his interest. "They loved me," he says. "They came to my office hours in droves."

He acknowledges that he made mistakes, including giving students intimate details about his sex life. "I did stupid things," he says. He also says he never should have escorted a drunk undergraduate from a party during the astronomical-society meeting six years ago. "I wouldn't do this anymore," he says. "I'd leave her there at the party. I could have found some other third party to take her back to her hotel room."

Mr. Marcy also acknowledges most of the instances of touching that female students at Berkeley complained about, but he says none of it was meant to be sexual. He says he frequently forgot he was a prominent scientist whose behavior might attract extra attention. "It's an area where I was also stupid."



Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Geoff Marcy's wife, Susan Kegley, says her husband's behavior has been misunderstood. "What I saw was Geoff helping people when they asked. It didn't seem out of bounds to me."

He says he stopped touching students a decade ago, when his colleagues began telling him his behavior made some people uncomfortable. Even though he now realizes that his embraces and kisses weren't always welcome, he says, he never should have been cast as one of science's most dangerous predators.

Mr. Marcy's wife, Susan Kegley, a chemist who founded and runs the Pesticide Research Institute here, says she considers her husband's behavior innocent and misunderstood. "What I saw was Geoff helping people when they asked. It didn't seem out of bounds to me," she says. "He didn't mean it to be a come-on."

He says he stopped touching students a decade ago, when his colleagues began telling him his behavior made some

Leaders outside of universities are now trying to force change in the sciences and other male-dominated fields where women have long complained of sexual harassment and discrimination. To those leaders, change has come too slowly, and universities have not been doing enough.

In philosophy, members of the national association's Committee on the Status of Women believed universities had ignored sexual harassment and gender discrimination for too long. So the committee began performing its own site visits to departments in 2013.

The panel's first visit, to the University of Colorado at Boulder, found a long list of "inappropriate, sexualized unprofessional behavior" that it said the university had failed to deal with. The accusations led the university to remove its chairman, suspend graduate-student admissions, and eventually get rid of two male faculty members.

Inaction has also fired up a member of Congress. Rep. Jackie Speier, a Democrat of California, called out an astronomer — Mr. Slater — during a speech last month on the House floor. Mr. Slater was found responsible for sexual harassment at the University of Arizona in 2005, but a few years after that he moved on to an endowed chair at the University of Wyoming. "Some universities," Ms. Speier said, "protect predatory professors with slaps on the wrist and secrecy."

In Mr. Marcy's case, colleagues in his department and a former leader of the astronomical society's Committee on the Status of Women helped guide students who eventually came forward with complaints. Joan T. Schmelz, who until last year was head of that committee, wrote a blog post in 2011 called "Coming Out of the Shadows: A Sexual-Harassment Story," based on her personal experience as a young scientist.

Although Ms. Schmelz didn't give details, including where and when it happened, she wrote that a male supervisor who had made inappropriate comments to her — including "I wish I could keep you in my pocket and take you out when it's convenient" — became vindictive when her significant other moved to town. The supervisor began bad-mouthing her to other scholars, Ms. Schmelz wrote, at the university and elsewhere.

After she published the post on her experiences, she says, female astronomers — including current students — started contacting her about harassment they'd experienced. Mr. Marcy's name kept coming up. "I tried to think about what I could do in this case," says Ms. Schmelz, who is now deputy director of the Arecibo Observatory, in Puerto Rico. So she asked each woman who spoke to her about Mr. Marcy if she wanted to know about other women who'd had similar experiences. If they said yes, she then offered: Would you want to talk to them? That's how the four women who eventually complained to Berkeley started communicating with one another. Mr. Parsons, the assistant professor at Berkeley, says he helped put the women in contact with more-senior astronomers at Berkeley, who guided them to the university's Title IX office.

Others, including a former Ph.D. student of Mr. Marcy's, also began publicly airing complaints about the field's "serial harassers." John Johnson, who is now an astronomy professor at Harvard University, wrote a blog post last March describing a "serial harasser's playbook." Such harassers gradually groom their victims, Mr. Johnson wrote, posing as supporters and touching them in seemingly innocuous ways and then escalating contact to see how far they can get. "Sure, cheek-kissing may be normal in other countries," wrote Mr. Johnson. "It's not here in the States. For serial harassers this is just one more ratchet step along the way to their ultimate goal."

Mr. Johnson didn't identify Mr. Marcy then, but he later published another post saying that most of what he had written about the harasser's playbook came from women's descriptions of Mr. Marcy's way of operating.

Berkeley, some say, might have been able to avoid a public uproar if it had acted more aggressively in the past. Young women made complaints similar to those that led to Mr. Marcy's downfall back in 1995, when he was a professor at San Francisco State University. In 2005, Ms. Murray-Clay — the professor at Santa Barbara, who was then a graduate student at Berkeley — went with other graduate students to the university's astronomy-department chairman to say several undergraduate women had complained to them about Mr. Marcy's behavior. Another group of students went to the university's Title IX office the next year, says Ms. Murray-Clay, but administrators told them that only the targeted undergraduate students could file formal complaints.

Then, in 2011, Berkeley received an anonymous complaint from a student saying she had seen Mr. Marcy rub another student's bare shoulder and say, "You would make a great professor." But since no formal complaints were filed, administrators simply spoke to Mr. Marcy about the problems and told him to stop. The university's Title IX office never conducted a full-fledged investigation until 2014, when the new set of complaints came in.

Imke de Pater, who was chair of the astronomy department until last year and handled the anonymous complaint in 2011 after administrators contacted her about it, says Mr. Marcy told her he had no sexual intentions. "Geoff is very generous and very caring and empathetic," says Ms. de Pater, who had worked with Mr. Marcy at Berkeley since he arrived, in 1999. Still, Ms. de Pater adds, "it's a sobering reminder that if you are a professor, you should not touch your students in any manner whatsoever."

Mr. Marcy is bitter about how his career at Berkeley ended. It was a targeted campaign to get rid of him, he says, fueled by people who were jealous of his success. Those people, says Mr. Marcy, contacted dozens of former students. "A lot of people going back 20 years got a phone call," says the ousted professor, "asking if there was anything that they ever saw Geoff Marcy do."



Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Geoff Marcy was forced to step down from his professorship at Berkeley in October.

Berkeley at first put Mr. Marcy on probation for five years, warning him that if he hugged, kissed, danced with, or touched students — except to shake their hands — he could be suspended for a semester without pay. That should have been the end of it, he says, but scientists from outside the university bashed him and Berkeley for not doing enough. The resulting media firestorm, he says, ultimately forced him to leave.

Ms. Murray-Clay agrees it should be universities' responsibility to handle accusations against professors, but the process doesn't always work. When Berkeley found Mr. Marcy responsible for harassment, and told him that if he got too close to students again he faced suspension, Ms. Murray-Clay says the university didn't inform people in his department. That meant no one who might be a future victim or even an observer knew Mr. Marcy's behavior was under scrutiny, says Ms. Murray-Clay, rendering the warning meaningless.

"How can that possibly protect students?" she asks. "It's absurd."

Berkeley administrators have defended their decision, saying it was the best they could do to quickly protect students from inappropriate behavior. Firing Mr. Marcy, administrators said, would have been much more complicated. The university would have had to hold a full hearing, where the standard of evidence needed to discipline a tenured professor is high.

"Discipline of a faculty member is a lengthy and uncertain process," Berkeley's chancellor and provost wrote in a statement last October. The university system formed a committee of administrators and faculty members to recommend how the UC system could better handle faculty discipline in cases of sexual violence and harassment. It is scheduled to present its recommendations in April. Berkeley officials declined to comment further for this article.

The ways universities handle employment matters frequently collide with outside interests in sexual-harassment cases, says Peter F. Lake, a professor and director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University's College of Law.

"People want something to happen quickly, and they want it to happen publicly," he says. "But neither of those things are traditional features of academic employment. Almost everybody has some process that slows things down and that allows an employee to come to a more confidential, less public resolution of what occurred."

University procedures for handling professors accused of sexual harassment are changing as institutions try to determine not just how to punish professors but what kinds of information should be shared when such a professor moves to another university.

Mr. Lieb, the molecular biologist at Chicago who stepped down following accusations that he had sexually propositioned female graduate students, was investigated for similar behavior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Chicago committee that hired Mr. Lieb knew about the allegations but hired him anyway, since UNC had found Mr. Lieb not responsible.

Mr. Slater, the Wyoming professor, was found responsible for sexual harassment and was penalized by the University of Arizona more than a decade ago. He says no complaints have been made against him since then, and he wonders whether it's fair that Congresswoman Speier brought up his case again last month.

"Should the mistake follow you forever?" he asks. "Or can you understand: Here is how you hurt people, and you never do it again?"

Mr. Lake, too, wonders whether, once a professor is found responsible for sexual harassment, that should be the end of his career. Increasingly, he says, professors are getting the message that any whiff of trouble could be threatening.

"This is radically changing people's orientation toward work because everyone realizes there's a grenade that can go off at any time," he says. "Trust and intimacy, the very things that make education work, are also the very tinder for other things to be introduced that could cause problems."

For Mr. Marcy, the explosion was devastating. His astronomy career is over, he says. The only research he is doing these days is on honeybees, helping his wife crunch data for her experiments on pesticides. All of his own grant projects have been turned over to other Berkeley astronomers.

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