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Statement of Elizabeth Johnson – Former student at UNCSA

My name is Elizabeth Johnson and I attended UNCSA from 1984-1987. At 15 years old, I left a supportive, loving, intact family to pursue dreams of training to be a professional dance artist—a dream since beginning classes at age 4. Accepted to an institution that held itself out as one of the most respected professional arts schools in the US after a highly competitive national audition, I was initially thrilled to be there. However, after being moved to the top level high school class, I was immersed in a world of sexual abuse and such confusing physical pain and psychological darkness that I began to experience anxious dread as an every-day normal.

As an underaged adolescent, I was subjected to sexual abuse that was normalized by my instructors as preparation for the future professional career I wanted so much. In weekly classes, my body was often violated by teachers who had well known reputations for being sexual predators, both within the school and in the greater dance community. This abuse was perpetrated through sexualized touching, explicitly pornographic language used to describe body parts, and me and my classmates being advised how to behave in sexually gratuitous ways.

I was also forced to witness the frequent violations of my classmates. As masterful manipulators and abusers, some of my dance instructors gaslit me into believing that these violations were necessary for my own good. To question or resist abuse resulted in public humiliation that silenced and shamed. There was always a fear of not being invited back to the program the next year if I failed to comply.

I remain staggered by the chronic negative impacts and damage those 3 traumatic years caused in the whole of my personal and professional life. I was groomed to accept sexual abuse as a daily fact of life and something I deserved. After leaving UNCSA at 18 years old—still so young—I wanted no part of an identity that was rooted in being a broken body and soul and by age 22, was seeking therapeutic intervention for my ongoing post-traumatic stress. Never feeling worthy of even my own self-respect, my life spiraled as a result of the intense and systematic sexual abuse by my teachers.

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Represented by Allred, Maroko & Goldberg and Lanier Law Group

October 4, 2021