

**NEWS** • Investigative

# Former Idyllwild Arts Academy student alleges she was groped by actor during school project

Lawsuit claims then-16-year-old was blamed for unwanted advances from 59-year-old Keith Lewis



Idyllwild Arts Academy students practice during school in the new William M. Lowman Concert Hall in Idyllwild, on Thursday, Mar.10, 2016.

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A former Idyllwild Arts Academy student alleges in a lawsuit that her passion for film was crushed in 2019 when a Hollywood actor hired by the school groped her, and a faculty member subsequently blamed her for the abuse.

The woman, who was 16 at the time, is suing the academy, the Idyllwild Arts Foundation and actor Keith Lewis, 59, of West Hills for sexual harassment, sexual battery and negligence. She is seeking unspecified damages in the civil complaint filed last week in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

“Plaintiff was an outgoing and dynamic girl who was enthusiastic about the film industry and film production,” the suit says. “However, plaintiff’s dreams were crushed when she was sexually assaulted, abused, and harassed by the person she looked up to.”

Lewis’ film and TV credits include reoccurring work on several soap operas, including “The Young and the Restless” and “Days of Our Lives,” and bit parts in “Robo Cop 2,” “Forrest Gump, and “Pulp Fiction.”

Lewis said in a brief phone interview Tuesday he was unaware of the lawsuit or the allegations from the former student. “I have no clue,” he said, adding he was hired at Idyllwild as an actor for a film project.

Cynthia G. Lawrence, an attorney for Idyllwild Arts Foundation, denied the allegations in the lawsuit.

“Idyllwild Arts takes allegations of sexual misconduct very seriously,” she said Wednesday in an email. “Such allegations do not reflect the culture Idyllwild Arts has built and is committed to. We are committed to providing a safe and secure environment allowing our students the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential, personally, artistically and academically.”

Any incident of reported misconduct is addressed through a rigorous fact-finding process, allowing Idyllwild to take appropriate action based on the outcome of the investigation, Lawrence said.

“Additionally, Idyllwild Arts is a mandated reporter and reports all allegations of sexual misconduct to law enforcement and child protective services,” she said. “Idyllwild Arts followed its reporting protocol in this alleged incident.”

Lewis was hired in the spring of 2019 as an instructor for Idyllwild’s first feature

The plaintiff, who is 19 and identified only as Jane Doe in the complaint, was an outgoing student at a public high school in Marin County when she enrolled at Idyllwild at the end of her sophomore year, according to the lawsuit.

## Inappropriate touching alleged

The plaintiff, who was learning and developing skills through Idyllwild's film and digital media program, was selected to join the crew for the feature film project and assigned to do makeup.

Lewis, serving as an adviser on the project, "touched plaintiff's buttocks without her consent" on several occasions in February and March 2019, the lawsuit says. "On one occasion, Lewis removed all of his clothing, except for his underwear, and while almost fully naked, asked plaintiff, 'How do you keep your vagina warm?' He also asked her to describe the type of underwear she was wearing."

The plaintiff didn't initially report Lewis' alleged conduct because she didn't want to ruin her classmates' opportunities to work with Lewis, the lawsuit says.

## Abuse reported

The plaintiff eventually notified Idyllwild's headteacher, at the time Annette Haywood Carter, who was dismissive and accusatory, according to the complaint.

"Rather than taking immediate action against Lewis and removing him from the film project, Ms. Carter commented on the size of plaintiff's chest, suggesting that her chest had caused Lewis to abuse her," the lawsuit states. "She then removed plaintiff from the project suggesting that plaintiff was the problem and not Lewis."

The suit alleges Carter also attempted to conceal the sexual assault.

Carter disputed the plaintiff's account. "I categorically deny the allegations in the lawsuit as they pertain to me," she said in an email. "I complied with all reporting obligations."

The plaintiff reported the alleged abuse to the Riverside County Sheriff's Department in April 2019, according to the suit. Information was not immediately available regarding whether the complaint was investigated.

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### Scott Schwebke | Investigative Reporter

Scott Schwebke is an investigative reporter for the Orange County Register and the Southern California News Group. A native of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., he was previously a breaking news and multimedia reporter for the Ogden, Utah, Standard-Examiner. Scott has also worked at newspapers in Utah, Colorado, North Carolina and Virginia covering everything from methamphetamine trafficking cops to hurricanes. He has also accompanied police on undercover drug buys and also provided an award winning, eyewitness account of the execution of a North Carolina death row inmate. Scott was part of the OC Register's investigative team that in 2017 produced the year-long, award winning Rehab Riviera series, examining problems in Southern California's drug rehabilitation industry. He also teamed up with reporter Joe Nelson in 2019 on Bad Apples, an award winning investigation that exposed years of sex abuse cover up in the Redlands Unified School District. Having spent two years living in England including Liverpool, he is an avid Beatles fan and memorabilia collector.

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