

Rehab Mogul Chris Bathum Faces Lawsuits Alleging Drug Use and Sexual Battery of Clients

BY HILLEL ARON

MONDAY, APRIL 25, 2016 AT 7:08 A.M.



Christopher Bathum at his coffee shop, Grounded, on Melrose

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Chris Bathum, the founder and board chairman of a chain of more than 20 sober living houses and outpatient clinics in California and Colorado (and the subject of a [December *L.A. Weekly* cover story](#)), has been sued three times in the past three months for allegations ranging from wrongful termination to sexual battery.

The most recent lawsuit, filed two weeks ago by a pair of former patients at one of Bathum's Community Recovery Los Angeles (CRLA) facilities, alleges that Bathum "isolated and targeted [the] plaintiffs and other women to prey on their addictions by using and supplying drugs around them, moving them around to isolated hotel rooms and remote locations, encouraging them to use drugs with him, and sexually molesting them when they were high and/or incapable of consent."

[L.A. Weekly's December story](#) outlined multiple allegations against Bathum and his embattled drug-rehab empire.

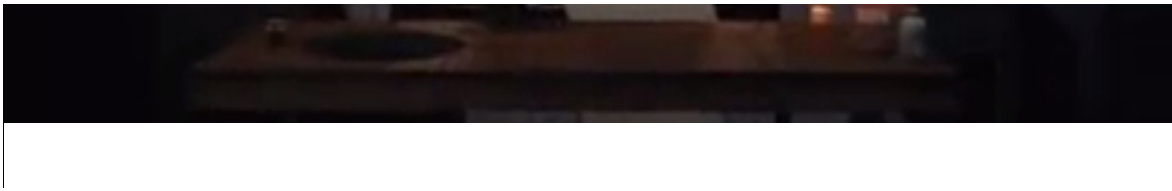
Bathum has denied nearly every charge leveled against him – to the *L.A. Weekly*, [on his blog](#) and in court filings – and, in February, filed a lawsuit against *L.A. Weekly* parent company Voice Media Group claiming the December cover story contained "multiple defamatory statements" that were "injurious of [Bathum's] trade, business and profession."

Since the article ran, several women have come forward accusing Bathum of drug use and sexual assault. In February, three former patients – Amanda Jester, Erika Braukis and Dana Reardon – [sued Bathum for sexual battery](#). In the lawsuit, Jester claims Bathum molested her during a guided meditation in a sweat lodge. Braukis claims that Bathum gave her crystal meth and made sexual advances toward her. Reardon claims Bathum gave her meth and heroin, forced her to watch him have sex with two other female patients, "attempted to force himself on Reardon" and "forced his fingers into Reardon's vagina despite her protests."

Days later, according to the complaint, Bathum overdosed on heroin and was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance.

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In March, Bathum filed a countersuit against the three women for libel and defamation.

The latest suit against Bathum was filed April 6 by two former patients, half-sisters Jennifer Irick and Stephanie Nicole Johnston. According to the suit, Bathum hired Irick as his personal assistant in 2014 and soon began making sexual advances toward her. The suit alleges:

Bathum would often ask Irick if he could hypnotize her. The hypnosis consisted of Bathum sitting behind Irick in her car and groping her while mumbling "comforting words" into her ear. Bathum had Irick work late with him one night during a sweat lodge session. While Irick was in the sweat lodge, Bathum began rubbing his hands up and down her vagina. Every day he would ask for or expect a little more. Eventually, Bathum began demanding sex and blow jobs. Rick believed she had no other option but to say yes.

Irick's half-sister, Johnston, also entered CRLA as a patient. According to the suit, Bathum began spending time with the two of them together:

Bathum would rent hotel rooms for Irick and Johnston. On one occasion Bathum met Irick and Johnston in a hotel in Venice Beach. That night Bathum, Irick and Johnston all drank together. On this night Bathum climbed on top of Johnston while she was pretending to be passed out and proceeded to have sex with her, without her consent.

On one occasion in mid-April of 2014, Bathum rented a room at the W Hotel in Los Angeles where Bathum provided Irick and Johnston with alcohol and meth. Bathum pretended like he had never done meth before. The three drank, did meth, and then engaged in a drug-fueled threesome.

The two sisters also described Bathum's advances in written statements to Blue Shield insurance investigators. According to the lawsuit, Bathum wrote Irick an email in late 2015 urging her to recant her statement to Blue Shield. "We could make this work out really well for everyone," he wrote, according to the suit. "I am about to sue Blue Shield for a lot of shit."

His offer: free treatment and an "internship" with him worth "at least 10K." Irick wrote, signed and notarized a recantation; according to the suit, Bathum later told CRLA staff that Irick was "trying to shake him down for money."

Bathum declined to comment directly to *L.A. Weekly*, instead referring us to public relations consultant Janell Barrett Jones. Jones in turn sent us a written statement signed by CRLA CEO Kirsten Wallace. The statement accuses the two sisters of trying to blackmail Bathum and says they both retracted their statements.

"The issues alleged in this lawsuit have been alleged, retracted and then alleged again within a very short period of time," according to the statement, which later claims: "One of the two sisters did indeed return for a second round of treatment – before returning to her home state and admitted relapse." It also alleges the half-sisters stole money from CRLA shortly before leaving: "At this time CRLA is looking into the possibility of pursuing the charges for theft, extortion and other crimes against one or both of the plaintiffs."

According to the suit, Bathum has a history of predatory behavior:

Bathum specializes in targeting young women who have suffered childhood traumas or sexual abuse and who are particularly vulnerable. Bathum used offers of "scholarships," "internships" and other rewards and inducements to young women to encourage them to trust Bathum and to permit Bathum and CRLA to misappropriate insurance money by billing for services which Bathum masqueraded as "treatment" but which involved him engaging in sexual and drug abuse toward plaintiffs and other clients. Bathum would then abuse and betray that trust under the guise of providing "treatment" and "therapy" to these young women, by isolating them in settings where Bathum would introduce and use drugs in front of them, aggressively encourage them to take drugs despite his knowledge that they had entered CRLA and paid for services to avoid drugs, and then force sexual encounters and demand sexual favors in return for their being allowed to continue in the CRLA program.

"He's a bad guy, based on the allegations of my clients," says Irick and Johnston's attorney, Alan Schimmel. "He shouldn't be in business."

This is the fourth lawsuit Schimmel has filed against Bathum. The first was in 2010, on behalf of Julie Hluchota, who accused Bathum of molesting her while she was an employee of Seasons, an earlier rehab of Bathum's (the suit was settled; Hluchota continued to struggle with drug addiction and died last year).

Wallace's statement suggests Schimmel's actions are hurting his clients: "By giving

audience to individuals when they are vulnerable and openly and actively using drugs, he is essentially handing them a loaded gun."

Schimmel also is representing Jester, Braukis and Reardon in their sexual battery lawsuit. And he's representing former CRLA employee Rose Stahl, who alleges in her March lawsuit that she was wrongfully terminated after she started leaking information about Bathum to insurance investigators. According to the suit:

When [Stahl] uncovered Bathum's abuses, and after [Stahl] was fired, Bathum openly discussed with other individuals very hurtful, delicate and private information about [Stahl] and her husband, who was a CRLA client. The information disclosed was information that was obtained by Bathum from [Stahl] and her husband under the guise of "therapy."

"More and more women are coming forward," Schimmel says. "I've talked to probably a dozen employees, whistleblowers or victims. ... They feel like they're in better company, like people won't think they're crazy."

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