

The New York Times
nytimes.com

June 7, 1999

Wall St. Victim or Young Rogue?; Christian Curry Found Trouble at Morgan Stanley

By JOSEPH KAHN

If family and friends had taken a poll when Christian Leigh Curry joined the Wall Street powerhouse Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in the summer of 1997, they might well have voted him black banker most likely to fit in.

Born to a wealthy New York family, Mr. Curry, 25, was raised to blend fluidly into social and business elites. He attended several of America's best schools. His striking good looks and incandescent smile smoothed his way with the black and white women he dated. He devoted himself equally to basketball, classical piano, the study of finance.

"I had no doubt that Christian would be more Morgan Stanley than 95 percent of the people at Morgan Stanley," said Dr. William Curry, Mr. Curry's father. "I mean his dress, his writing, his education. No one was better prepared."

It did not work out that way. Just nine months after joining the firm, Morgan Stanley abruptly dismissed him. He struck back with a big discrimination suit, claiming that racism and homophobia run rampant at one of the finance industry's most admired firms. Both Morgan Stanley and Mr. Curry found themselves in legal trouble.

What happened to Christian Curry? The answer is still obscure. But his own gaffes and indiscretions are part of the story. The strapping 6-foot-2 Mr. Curry let a fashion photographer persuade him to pose nude for sexually provocative pictures a few years ago, and has watched helplessly ever since as the photos found their way into gay pornographic magazines. He also fell into a trap set by police last year, when they arrested him for conspiring to break into Morgan Stanley's computer system. Charges were eventually dropped, but the question still dogs him: Is he a victim or a rogue -- or a little of both?

One thing seems certain. Morgan Stanley and other Wall Street firms will not soon forget his name. The firm responded aggressively to Mr. Curry's threat of a lawsuit and is now under criminal investigation for a payment it made to an informant involved in a police sting operation against Mr. Curry. Morgan Stanley also suspended two in-house lawyers who orchestrated its handling of the Curry case.

The conflict began a year ago, when Morgan Stanley dismissed Mr. Curry, who had worked for nine months as an analyst in the firm's real estate finance department. Morgan Stanley said he abused his expense account. But his dismissal came just days after an issue of Playguy, a gay pornographic magazine, hit the newsstands with a beaming Mr. Curry on the cover and an eight-page photo spread inside.

Three months later, police arrested Mr. Curry in a park on East 43d Street, where he had handed \$200 to an undercover police officer posing as a computer hacker. He was charged with five felony counts, including conspiracy and trespassing. His idea, police said, was to plant fake E-mail messages to buttress a planned discrimination lawsuit.

Mr. Curry denies the police account and maintains that he was framed. True or not, the Manhattan District Attorney announced last month that he would not be prosecuted. The office cites Morgan Stanley's \$10,000 payment to a police informant and college acquaintance of Mr. Curry named Charles Joseph Luethke, without whom police could not have arranged the sting operation. Both Morgan Stanley and Mr. Luethke are under investigation in connection with the \$10,000 payment.

Through his lawyer, Benedict P. Morelli, Mr. Curry has filed an attention-grabbing \$1.35 billion lawsuit. But his real mission seems to be to show that his own mistakes -- the nude photographs, the E-mail scam, his liaison with Mr. Luethke -- are relatively minor, compared with Morgan Stanley's misdeeds. The firm not only tolerates a violent strain of racism and homophobia, he said, but also has no qualms about trying to destroy the life of an employee who fails to fit in.

"I am not Jesus," he said. "But under no circumstances should I have been crushed like this." Morgan Stanley declined to comment in detail for this article. But it says that Mr. Curry's claims of discrimination and intimidation are without merit.

Christian Curry's parents saw to it that their son became seamlessly integrated. He attended elite private preparatory schools. At Columbia University, he was the only black member of his fraternity, Kappa Delta Rho, a haven for basketball players on 114th Street near Columbia. He was on the varsity basketball squad. He played classical piano seriously.

"One thing I can tell you about Christian Curry is that this is not a guy who plays the race card," says Daryl Conti, who supervised Mr. Curry's fraternity as a student dean. "I think in many ways he's more comfortable with whites than blacks."

Nor would his family, in all likelihood, encourage him to think in black and white terms. William Curry Sr. is a surgeon at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. Wealthy and well connected, he lives in an Adirondacks Lodge-style mansion atop a high hill in Chappaqua, N.Y. He counts David N. Dinkins, the former New York Mayor, among his patients and friends.

The family spends summers in Sag Harbor, a haven for wealthy blacks on the Eastern tip of Long Island. When the nearby Shinnecock Hills Country Club, one of the most exclusive in the New York region, faced pressure to open its doors for the first time to blacks in 1992, it turned first to the Curry Family.

In and Out of School, Then, a 'Stupid Mistake'

As a child, Christian had a temper he could not always control. After matches on the family tennis court, he sometimes smashed his racket in frustration. He was once suspended from junior high school after cursing at a teacher for assigning him a bad grade.

Troubles followed him to high school. Both he and his elder brother, William Jr., who is now a surgical resident at Massachusetts General Hospital, attended the Lawrenceville School, an elite boarding school near Princeton, N.J. Mr. Curry, unlike the brother whom he refers to as "the son with the Midas touch," did not thrive there.

He attended between 1987 and 1989, then pulled out and attended Horace Greeley High School, a public school in Chappaqua. He returned to Lawrenceville a year later but left again. This time, he was caught drinking alcohol, and his father had him withdraw. (He eventually received his high school degree from Northfield Mount Hermon, a Massachusetts prep school.)

But it was shortly after Mr. Curry arrived at Columbia that he made what he calls "my first really stupid mistake." His father agrees with that assessment, saying that Christian Curry let his good looks go to his head. "So many people told him he was a beautiful male, his ego just started working overtime."

Dating a woman with connections in the modeling world, Mr. Curry decided that he needed a portfolio. As Mr. Curry explains it, a photographer offered to waive his usual \$1,000 fee if Mr. Curry would agree to take off his clothes and pose. Mr. Curry seems not to have thought twice about the matter, even signing a consent form that relinquished control over the photos.

Friends said Mr. Curry did take modeling seriously, in part to gain some independence from his parents' money. He appeared in ads for Hugo Boss and Gucci and did runway shows at Fashion Cafe in Manhattan. He earned enough to buy himself a green convertible BMW 325i.

But that Mr. Curry had made an error was clear even before he graduated from Columbia. The photo series he had posed for showed up in a pornographic magazine called Black Inches, which soon came to the attention of house mates at Kappa Delta Rho. Friends said he had a falling out with some fraternity brothers, several of whom smashed the windows of his BMW.

"With those pictures, I let down my friends, my frat brothers, and my family," Mr. Curry said. Then, quoting Pat Riley, coach of the National Basketball Association Miami Heat, he said, "You can't unscramble scrambled eggs."

The job at Morgan Stanley seemed like a fresh start. The firm had recruited him heavily, and he arrived with a burst of exuberance.

But things went wrong early on. Mr. Curry got the feeling that many people at the firm, even when they appeared friendly, were trying to squeeze him into a racial straightjacket.

"Some vice president would walk by a white guy's cubicle and say, 'Hey, Chris, how are you?' " Mr. Curry says. "Then they would come by mine and say" -- Mr. Curry does his best imitation of street talk baritone -- "Yo, Christian, wah s'up, dude."

All-Night Sessions Or an Early Good Night?

Nonetheless, Mr. Curry says he threw himself into the job. He had no vacation days in nine months. Work many days began at 9 A.M. and ended near midnight. All-night sessions churning out paperwork for real estate deals were common.

Some Morgan Stanley bankers who spoke on the condition of anonymity remember it differently. Several said Mr. Curry sometimes skipped out early, brought friends to the office during hectic work sessions, and never seemed to thrive in the obsessive, all-consuming investment banking culture that some compare to army boot camp.

Work relations clearly grew tense. Mr. Curry blames it on racism. Some accusations are detailed in his 25-page lawsuit, which named 11 Morgan Stanley executives as defendants. Among the accusations is that one of his bosses, Robert Weaver, excluded him from a team of bankers making a presentation to the Mid-America Realty Company because white executives there were not accustomed to seeing black professionals. At a Christmas party, Mr. Curry also said he was asked to put on an curly wig and a large pair of false lips in order to poke fun at a senior black executive at the firm.

When Mr. Curry revealed his upper-class roots, he said, white bosses lashed out at him. He recalls one day wearing a necktie bearing the logo of Shinnecock Hills to work. A banker spotted it and told him: "That's a very exclusive club. Are you a caddy there?"

On another occasion, Mr. Curry said his banking group excluded him from a deal-closing celebration at the upscale Manhattan restaurant

Le Cirque. That was despite the fact that it was Mr. Curry who made a reservation and arranged payment for the dinner when the Morgan Stanley name was not enough to secure a table on a busy night. Mr. Curry was a college friend of Mauro Maccioni, a member of the family that owns Le Cirque. Mr. Maccioni confirms Mr. Curry's account.

Morgan Stanley declined to respond to specific allegations in the lawsuit except to say that it has reviewed the charges and considers them baseless.

Despite his accusations of racism, Mr. Curry says he feels certain he would still be at Morgan Stanley were it not for the June 1998 issue of Playguy. The magazine was widely available at newsstands near Morgan Stanley's neon-wrapped skyscraper in Times Square. Within hours, copies were circulating around the office. Someone ripped a page from the magazine and stuck it in the men's bathroom with "faggot" scrawled on it, Mr. Curry said.

The lawsuit cites Mr. Curry's dismissal, which came shortly after the magazine appeared, as evidence of discrimination based on perceived sexual orientation, which is illegal in New York.

Mr. Curry denies he is gay, but says that his colleagues at Morgan Stanley thought he was.

Morgan Stanley reiterated that he was dismissed for expense account abuses. A person close to the firm cited some specific violations, including bills from upscale Manhattan strip clubs like Flash Dancers. Mr. Curry once bought compact discs and submitted the expense as a work dinner, the person said. Mr. Curry admits that he was warned about expenses once. But he said that he has evidence that his violations were minor and routine and that he looks forward to exposing his former colleagues' expense accounts in court.

"I just pray that that's their defense," Mr. Curry said.

It was shortly after his departure from Morgan Stanley that Mr. Curry got himself in trouble again. He said he was furious, even inconsolable, about losing his job. Though he drove cross-country to Los Angeles to start anew, he soon returned to New York with the idea of filing a discrimination suit.

An Old Acquaintance Brings New Troubles

In June, Mr. Curry reconnected with an old friend, Charles Joseph Luethke, the middleman who would soon bring grief to both Mr. Curry and Morgan Stanley. The two had met in 1994. Mr. Luethke, who at 29 is four years older than Mr. Curry, was a part-time student at Columbia who often regaled people there with tales of heroism in the Delta Force, the United States Army commando unit. Mr. Curry has repeatedly called him a bum. Still, Mr. Luethke became a regular visitor to Mr. Curry's room at Kappa Delta Rho. The two later had a falling out and lost touch.

They reconnected when Mr. Luethke approached Mr. Curry after his dismissal. What they said remains in dispute. Mr. Curry said that Mr. Luethke claimed to have access to some anti-black and anti-gay E-mail messages from Morgan Stanley's computer system. Mr. Luethke said that it was Mr. Curry who brainstormed about ways of shoring up his lawsuit. Whatever the truth, Mr. Curry says, he was duped. "Like a fool, I fell for it," he said.

A short time later, Mr. Luethke recorded one of their scheming sessions on tape. In mid-July, he took copies of the tape to the police and to Morgan Stanley. The New York Police Department, working closely with both Morgan Stanley and Mr. Luethke, then set up the sting operation against Mr. Curry.

Mr. Curry claims he was framed, arguing that he intended only to retrieve messages that were already on the firm's computers. Lawyers close to the investigation say otherwise -- that the tape-recorded evidence clearly shows that Mr. Curry conspired to plant the E-mail messages. The District Attorney's office has not released the evidence.

It was Morgan Stanley's own blunder that rescued him. Shortly after Mr. Curry's arrest, the firm secretly paid \$10,000 it thought would benefit Mr. Luethke. The District Attorney's office, which said it belatedly learned of the payment, said it diminished the chances of winning a conviction of Mr. Curry in a jury trial.

Yet even after his arrest, Mr. Curry did not sever his ties to Mr. Luethke, the man who betrayed him. In September, Marissa Wheeler, Mr. Curry's fiancée, filed harassment charges against Mr. Luethke. But Mr. Curry nonetheless continued a clumsy dialogue with his antagonist, who remained an occasional drinking buddy.

The reason, Mr. Curry said, was that for a second time he could not resist Mr. Luethke's entreaties. Mr. Luethke once again claimed to have evidence that would bolster Mr. Curry's lawsuit -- this time showing how Morgan Stanley conspired to put him in jail.

Indeed, several complaints in the lawsuit are derived from Mr. Luethke's view of events. These include allegations that Morgan Stanley colluded with police to entrap Mr. Curry, including offering police detectives jobs if they agreed to stage the sting operation. The lawsuit's assertion that Philip J. Purcell, Morgan Stanley's chairman and chief executive, had a direct role in Mr. Curry's arrest is also a contention held by Mr. Luethke and denied by Mr. Purcell.

"Okay, so I'm an idiot," Mr. Curry says when asked about recent contacts with Mr. Luethke. But he adds, a bit half-heartedly, "This should really be about Morgan Stanley, not about me."