

# College dreams, despair

Scandal lays bare the stress of elite admissions game

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — With dreams of UCLA for her daughter, single mother Donna Balancia chose a high-rent apartment to get her into Beverly Hills High School, which she hoped would give her the best shot at the college of her choice.

Once there, she'd bring her daughter to the UCLA tennis court to practice, hoping she would be noticed by the coach. Her daughter excelled as a varsity athlete in tennis and lacrosse and earned a 3.9 GPA. But in the end, the teen's SAT scores were too low for UCLA or the University of Southern California.

"I did some crazy things, but nothing illegal," Balancia said.

## The desperation

The national college admissions bribery scandal that broke last week laid bare the stress, and sometimes, desperation that many families experience when their children are going through the ultracompetitive process of seeking admission to the nation's top colleges.

The man at the center of the bribery scandal, disgraced college consultant William "Rick" Singer, is accused of taking millions of dollars in bribes to pay off corrupt athletic coaches and standardized test administrators to help get clients' children into elite colleges.

He is accused of enriching himself, taking advantage of the anxieties that have turned tutoring and college admissions counseling into a \$1 billion industry. From hiring \$1,000-an-hour tutors to multiple admissions and writing coaches, to pushing sports and community service, parents have given in to any number of pressures.

Writing coach Cathy Altman guides college hopefuls through their admissions essays, but she's been asked by parents — more than once — how much she'd charge to write the essay herself. Sometimes parents fret more than the students over what college



Donna Balancia said she did "some crazy things, but nothing illegal" to try to get her daughter into UCLA.

they'll get in, she said.

"I had a mom two years ago who'd email X's version along with the one [the mom] wrote. Yikes," Altman said via email.

Andrew Belasco, the chief executive officer of College Transitions, an Atlanta-based admissions consulting company, said it receives inquiries from families with children who are as young as fourth- and fifth-graders.

"We tell those parents to call back," he said.

Manhattan Beach, California, parent Gail Winthrop has been through the process three times and is bracing for the

fourth now that her youngest child is 16.

"It's an awful year. I'm not going to lie. It's a really stress-filled, awful, awful year," Winthrop said.

"It's a lot of pressure but it's pressure that you feel for them," she said. "Because you want your kids dreams to come true."

She hired a consultant, Collegewise, to spare herself from having to pester her children about their essays and applications but said she can't imagine a parent's resorting to the measures outlined in the federal case unsealed in Boston.

Prosecutors said parents paid Singer from 2011 through last month to bribe coaches and administrators to falsely make their children look like star athletes to boost their chances of getting into college. The consultant also hired ringers to take college entrance exams for students and paid off insiders at testing centers to alter students' scores. Parents spent anywhere from \$200,000 to \$6.5 million to guarantee their children's admission, officials said.

In affluent New Canaan, Connecticut, many parents who attended Ivy League schools and

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— Donna Balancia, a single mother who hoped to help her daughter get admitted to UCLA

are determined to have their children follow in their footsteps are surprised to learn how much more competitive it is for this generation to win admission, according to Cynthia Rivera, the leader of the high school's counseling department.

"It's something that we do have to talk often about and really work with them to understand that there are many, many fine schools. And we often talk about where the leaders of the country attended university and how to think of this in a broader range," Rivera said.

The high school occasionally hosts career nights, when town residents talk about how they got where they are. Students are fascinated to learn about hugely successful people who did not attend one of the most elite schools, said Susan Carroll, coordinator of the school's college and career center.

## Happy at community college

Balancia's daughter, now 20, is at Santa Monica College, studying to be a graphic designer. At one point, she had thought of transferring to UCLA, Balancia said, but she is happy at the community college.

Balancia said her approach to child-rearing as an older mom was more laid back than some of the young "helicopter" moms she observed in Beverly Hills or the high-achieving parents caught up in the college scandal who "fell into the trap" of wanting their kid to stand out in their elite world.

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