



## Friends, family in The Colony stand by arrested Arizona beauty queen

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She was a standout at The Colony High School – honor society officer, student council member, varsity cheerleader.

Eight years later, Kumari Fulbright has a college degree, two beauty pageant crowns and plans for a career in law. In recent days, she's also been a big hit on the Internet and featured in newspapers across the land.

There she is, in a shiny black bikini top and pants, holding a military-style rifle – a gun calendar pinup, Miss May 2008.

There she is, with tormented face, ratty hair and puffy eyes, the Tucson police mug shot taken when she was charged last month with kidnapping, robbing and assaulting an ex-boyfriend.

The man says she and three men held him captive and threatened to kill him in what police say was a dispute over jewelry. He has accused Ms. Fulbright of biting him and sticking a knife up his nose.

She has pleaded not guilty and is free on \$50,000 bail. Attempts to reach her have been unsuccessful. Her parents, Fred and Valerie Fulbright, responding to questions via e-mail, say the charges "have been devastating to the whole family."

"We're confident our daughter's name will be cleared," Ms. Fulbright said.

Bloggers and other writers have feasted on the news. Some have all but convicted the "Beauty Queen Gone Bad." And in time, the facts of what happened in her apartment on Dec. 8 may be known.

Whatever the truth, for some of those who knew her in high school and at her home in Carrollton, the wild pictures and bizarre allegations clearly show that Kumari Semon Fulbright, now 25, has moved far beyond her North Texas years.

'The girl next door'

"If there was ever a perfect teenager it would be her," said Belle Joyner, who lived next door to Ms. Fulbright and taught her history at Arbor Creek Middle School in Carrollton. "She was kind, caring, very studious. She was the girl next door, better than the girl next door.

"That's why it's so shocking," she said.

Susie Richardson, mother of one of Ms. Fulbright's classmates, echoes the fond memories and says she, too, was stunned by the news and pictures.

"When I saw that mug shot, I couldn't believe it," she said. "It makes me so sad."

Felicia Koppang said her classmate was "energetic, very strong-minded." She hung out mostly with her fellow cheerleaders and did her share of partying like "everybody did." And "if somebody got in her face, she'd get right back."

Lisa Carter lost touch with Ms. Fulbright after graduation, but recalls her as "sweet, down to earth, accepting of people no matter who you were. She was natural, very beautiful ... someone you remember."

And now her troubles in Tucson.

"It surprises me, but a lot can happen in eight years," she said. "People can change, sometimes for the good or the bad. You never know."

An older man

After high school, Ms. Fulbright moved back to her native Michigan. In December 2004, she received a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan with a major in psychology.

In Michigan she met Robert A. Ergonis, 19 years her senior, whose past included convictions for marijuana trafficking, carrying a concealed weapon and breaking into vending machines.

She lived with Mr. Ergonis in a house he owned in Melvindale, Mich., a Detroit suburb, and moved with him to Tucson.

There she put her brown eyes, smile and poise on display, winning the Miss Pima County pageant in 2005 after presenting a theatrical interpretation of Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman." A year later, the 5-foot-4, 110-pound beauty was crowned Miss Desert Sun.

Ms. Fulbright enrolled in the University of Arizona law school in fall 2006. A year later she was on the editorial board of the *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* and working as a volunteer researcher for U.S. District Judge Raner Collins.

And after responding to a call for models, she was hired to pose last spring for the Subguns.com 2008 calendar – presenting, as a promo puts it, "weapons lovingly displayed by twelve of the hottest girls next door."

"She was very nice, easy to work with, an extremely professional model," said Jeff Hawley, the calendar's photographer.

His Miss May's run-in with the law has been not only surprising but very nice for calendar sales, he said. "We had a huge spike in sales" after the news broke. "We had so much traffic on our Web site it crashed the server."

Five-count indictment

A five-count criminal indictment has crashed Ms. Fulbright's world. A conviction could put her behind bars for years. For now, she has been suspended from law school.

Tucson police believe Ms. Fulbright and three men, including Mr. Ergonis, detained, roughed up and threatened her then-boyfriend Josh T. Conway for supposedly stealing jewelry Mr. Ergonis had given her during their four years together. Ms. Fulbright ended the relationship last summer when Mr. Ergonis began using illegal drugs again, said her attorney Marc Beginin.

"We always thought that Rob was good and respectful to Kumari," said her mother. "He supported her in her academic endeavors. Our only concern was the age difference."

Mr. Conway, who started dating Ms. Fulbright after the breakup, told investigators she invited him to her apartment and, while he was waiting as she showered, two men entered the unit, confronted him with guns and bound him with plastic ties and duct tape. They later stole several hundred dollars from his wallet, his telephone and car keys, he said.

In one interview, he told investigators he was taken to a Tucson house, where a third man joined in, and returned to Ms. Fulbright's apartment, where she accused him of stealing her jewelry and assaulted him.

"Kumari straddled him while he was sitting on a chair and bit him on his left ear lobe, slapped him in the face with plastic bags that had items in them, bit him on the webbing of his hand, stuck a butcher knife into his ear and talked about shoving it into his brain," an officer reported.

Another report has Mr. Conway, 24, alleging that the biting and knife threat occurred before he was taken to the house.

Finally left alone with Ms. Fulbright in her apartment, Mr. Conway told police, he escaped after freeing himself and struggling with his gun-wielding guard.

Sgt. Fabian Pacheco, a Tucson police spokesman, said the case against Ms. Fulbright is based on Mr. Conway's word, information from a neighbor to whose home he fled and supporting evidence, including duct tape and the alleged victim's red and swollen hands.

"It was a complete investigation by police detectives," he said.

A box of marijuana was among the evidence seized by police from Ms. Fulbright's apartment. Its ownership is unclear, but police reports don't suggest drugs or alcohol played a role in the incident.

"Kumari would drink socially, never to excess and never ever used drugs," her mother said. "Kumari was very against drugs of any kind."

Kept to herself

One of Ms. Fulbright's neighbors, Steve Kincaid, said he knows nothing about Mr. Conway's allegations or conflict involving Ms. Fulbright. She was quiet, kept to herself and would occasionally go out with her boyfriend, he said.

In recent months, he said, she had begun spending much of many days outside her apartment.

"I would find her lying outside on the sidewalk. She would sit out there for hours and hours," he said. "Reading, smoking, writing in a notebook."

"She would sit in her car with the engine running and the windows rolled up," he said.

"She's a law student. Maybe it's the stress of school."

Her attorney, Mr. Beginin, said Ms. Fulbright wasn't allowed to smoke in her apartment. "This gentleman doesn't know her and his comments don't deserve a response," he said.

Ms. Fulbright denies the criminal allegations and wasn't present during Mr. Conway's abduction, the attorney said. She has no criminal record, according to a records search.

"Everybody is saying, 'How could she do this?' The point is, she didn't," he said.

The attack was a payback by Mr. Ergonis for the theft of his gifts, he said. "You had a perfect storm of ex-boyfriends, and Kumari got caught in the middle of it.

"If anything, she's guilty of making poor choices in men," he said.

Her side of the story

After she declined to let police officers into her apartment the night of the attack, police "lifted" Ms. Fulbright out of an open rear window and detained her, according to a police report.

She initially declined to provide information, an investigator reported, but later said she confronted Mr. Conway about her missing jewelry and "jumped on" him when he pulled a handgun. She told police the gun fired during the struggle over the weapon and Mr. Conway fled.

"The creep stole jewelry from her, and he's embellishing this to cover himself," said Mr. Beginin, who employed Ms. Fulbright last summer in his Detroit office. She had not reported the theft to Tucson police, he said.

A review of police reports shows Mr. Conway gave officers conflicting times for his arrival at Ms. Fulbright's apartment. He identified a suspect who was later cleared, and in an interview with police he admitted pawning Ms. Fulbright's jewelry, saying he did so at her request.

Attempts to contact Mr. Conway were unsuccessful. Court records show he was charged with assault and disorderly conduct last year in Tucson. The charges were dismissed after he completed a court-approved program.

Mr. Ergonis remains a fugitive. A second man allegedly involved in the incident, Larry B. Hammond, is being held in lieu of \$50,000 bail, facing the same charges as Ms. Fulbright. A third, unidentified suspect also is being sought.

*Research librarian Adam Barth contributed to this report.*