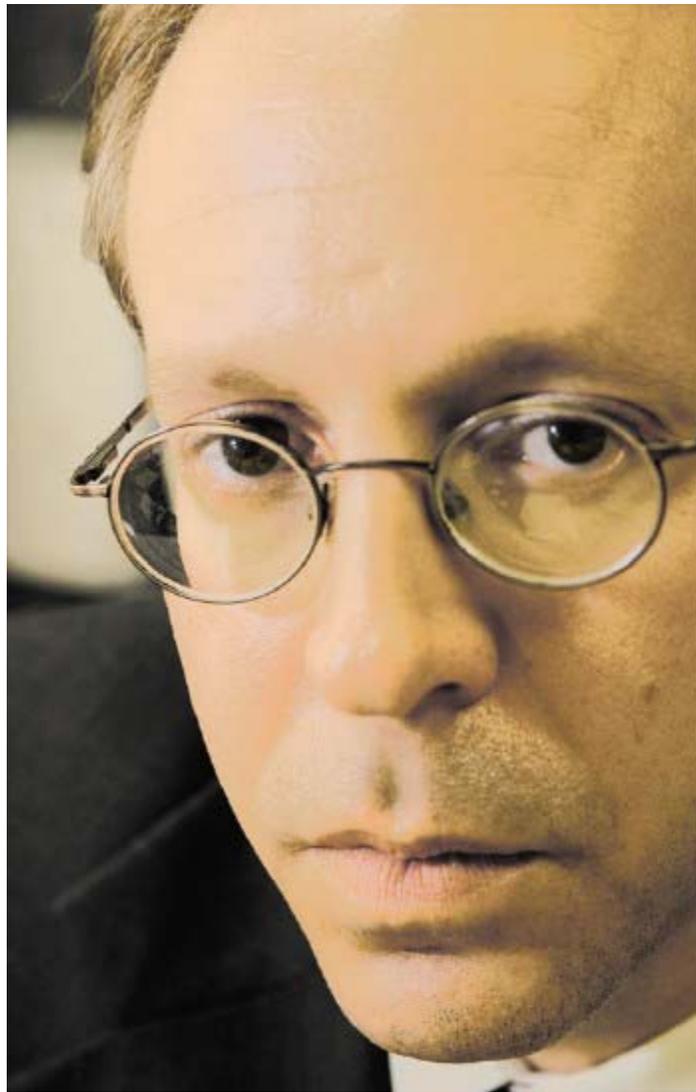


## How a vicious pit bull attack and drugged-out ex lead to the downfall of a promising young lawyer

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By Matt Pulle

If David Gold reflected on his life one month ago, he might have thought everything was going well. Just 35 years old, with thinning brown hair that undercuts a boyish grin, Gold was a promising attorney with a knack for landing exciting and unusual cases that made headlines. He made money—lots of it—and while he wasn't filthy rich just yet, he drove a Land Rover and had two sleek Porsches and a boat parked in the garages of his West Nashville home. When he wasn't practicing law, the enterprising attorney was helping to start a telecommunications company from his office.



Gold Standard: Successful attorney Dave Gold saw his career slip away after a drug-prone ex-girlfriend did him in. Photo by Eric England.

Today, though, Gold's career is in ruins. Amid the holiday season, Gold is staring down a 90-day jail sentence during which he'll be locked up with some of the same criminals he once defended. Just two weeks ago, he pled guilty to being an accessory after the fact of an especially aggravated robbery. Prosecutors say that Gold encouraged a young witness to lie to help a client, and they have the audiotape to prove it. Gold, though, says that he's an honest attorney who became mired in an emotional and volatile case that rapidly careened out of control. By his own admission, he made many mistakes. His first one was letting an ex-con who goes by the nickname "Bones" set him up on a date.

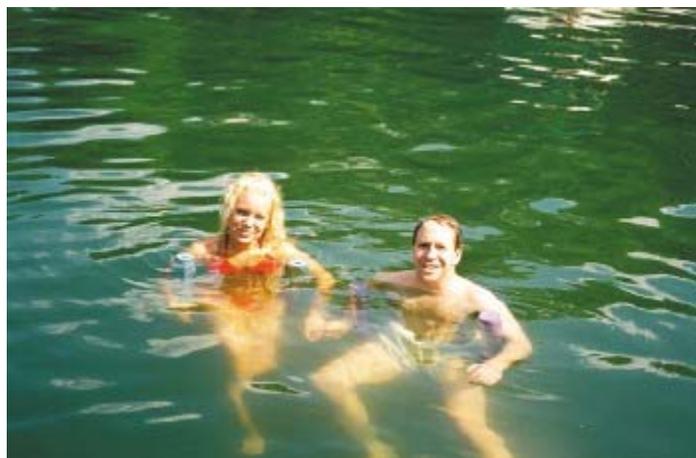
Tall and thin with tattoos from head to toe, Jeffrey Lee "Bones" Hammons is a 38-year-old ex-con with a rap sheet that dates back to Ronald Reagan's presidency. Gold had represented Hammons on a number of serious charges, managing to keep him out of prison every time. The attorney knew his client wasn't exactly a gentleman, but last April, Gold let Hammons play matchmaker.

"I'm a 35-year-old, single attorney, and I don't get the opportunity to meet a lot of nice girls," Gold says. "So when he said, 'I've got a hot little girl I'd like you to meet,' I said 'sure.' A 1997 graduate of the Nashville School of Law, Gold adds that he ran a criminal background check on his prospective date, which turned up clean.

Tara Wilee was a blond, 20-year-old single mom with a penchant for attracting no-good boyfriends, including Hammons himself, when she met the appreciably better-mannered David Gold. An unlikely couple, they dated for more than two months, never falling in love but always having fun together. They certainly didn't debate the finer points of law, but they did play water sports, attend auto races and catch the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Still, Wilee wasn't someone Gold ever thought about marrying. And on July 4, their relationship began to unravel when she stood him up for a date to watch the fireworks. After patching things up a month or so later, she again stood him up because she hoped to make \$400 dancing at a bachelor party.

"At that point," Gold says matter-of-factly, "I knew the end was near."



Troubled Waters: It wasn't love, and it ended badly.

On Oct. 14, in the wee hours of a Thursday morning, Wilee had been popping the anti-anxiety drug Xanax at her Antioch apartment. With her was James Batey, a troubled 23-year-old she had met that evening and whose sister allegedly sold her the drug. Batey says that the two weren't really on a date, that they were just getting to know each other. A few other people were there too. Wilee's young son, Preston, was in the apartment at the time, although Batey says he didn't know that initially.

When her actions that night later became part of a criminal inquiry, Wilee testified that she blacked out for a while. She might have been drinking and smoking marijuana too. She just doesn't remember. Batey says that both of them were doing things they shouldn't, before their night took a sudden turn for the worse.

"She got real drunk and started taking pills," Batey says. "We were smoking marijuana and everything else. Then she started accusing everybody of taking her pit bull. Everybody left, but I was a dumb ass and didn't leave."

Wilee then claimed that the culprit who stole her pit bull was Batey's friend, who had come by the apartment earlier that evening. She demanded that he call his friend and have him return the dog. That's when she contacted Hammons, her ex-boyfriend and protector.

Nobody calls Hammons for his peacemaking skills. Metro police have arrested him nearly 20 times in the last 18 years, for offenses ranging from drug possession to aggravated assault. Gold says that his last known job was running a garage in the Donelson area. A few years ago, he pled guilty to money laundering, promoting prostitution and felony possession of a weapon. Gold got him a suspended sentence. Before Hammons set Wilee up with his attorney, he had dated the woman and given her the dog that was now believed to be missing.

When Wilee had Hammons on the line, she gave the phone to Batey. Police say he threatened to kill Batey unless he found Wilee's pit bull and returned it immediately.

"I thought Brandon [Batey] would listen to a male figure who's more intimidating than a little girl," Wilee testified during Hammons' preliminary hearing, explaining why she called her ex-boyfriend.

Police say that Batey was knocking on Wilee's door, scrambling to find a ride home when Hammons showed up in his green Ford Explorer at around 1:45 a.m. With him was Biscuit, one of Hammons' pit bulls. Batey tried to run, but Hammons caught up with him outside a door near the complex's parking lot.

"I ran through a breezeway banging on people's doors," Batey says. "I ran back down the stairs and got cornered and pinned up against a sliding glass door. The dog was chewing off my ear." Batey says that his assailant meanwhile punched and kicked him and slammed his head against the pavement. He faded in and out of consciousness.

Witnesses corroborated much of Batey's story, saying that a white male with long hair and tattoos punched and kicked the victim and ordered his dog to attack. The dog tore into Batey's

head, throat and arms. Police say that when the dog would cease, Hammons ordered him to attack again. Hammons then stole Batey's gold chain, some cash and, of course, his Xanax.

A demonstrably unreliable witness, Wilee later testified in a preliminary hearing that she heard Batey scream, although she couldn't exactly tell what was happening. Her explanation was that she simply froze. Witnesses later saw Hammons' Ford Explorer depart the scene after the attack, while Wilee simply returned to her apartment as if nothing had happened.

Batey was left for dead. The dog mangled his throat and tore off both his ears, one of which was gnawed beyond repair. Police say that it's a miracle Batey survived.

When the police arrived at the scene and knocked on Wilee's door, she didn't answer. She later drove to Hammons' home. Meanwhile, her missing pit bull, the dog whose plight instigated the entire violent melee, had been in the woman's apartment all along.

On Oct. 15, as Batey was fighting for his life at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Gold arrived at his White Bridge Road law office. Hammons, Wilee and her cousin, Chris Woodall, had shown up, and Wilee commenced to tell him a horrible, convoluted story. After smoking pot, drinking and taking copious amounts of Xanax, she claimed she had nearly been raped and robbed the night before by someone named "Brandon Baby." She then called Hammons, who contacted a friend of his who had a pit bull. That friend, whom she would not identify but claimed wasn't Hammons, ordered the dog to attack this Brandon Baby character, her would-be rapist.

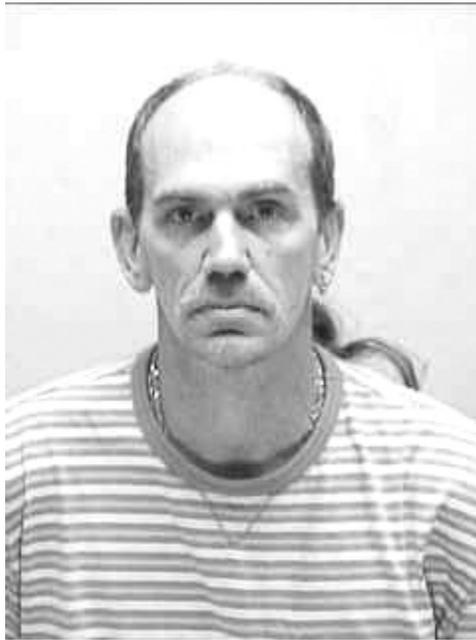
Gold says that he had some questions about the details in her story—and wondered if it wasn't some sort of drug deal gone bad—but he believed the basic facts. Gold encouraged her to call the police and give a statement. An officer came to his office and, after hearing her story, had a detective come over to talk to her. She told the same story to the detective, who was incredulous. "We don't believe you," he said.

The detective showed her a picture of Hammons and said, "Do you know who this is?" She initially refused to answer, but Gold encouraged her to. He then asked her, "Do you know him by the name 'Bones'?" Again, she didn't answer, but Gold once again directed her to cooperate.

Gold concedes that he didn't tell Wilee to tell the whole story, including her drug use. He worried that she'd open herself up to criminal charges, not the least of which was child endangerment. "My job as a defense attorney is not to tell the police my client is involved in a drug deal gone bad, and then nearly got raped and robbed," he says. "My job is to tell them he tried to rape her and rob her."

Still, the detective wasn't buying her story. Gold says that he met with Wilee privately and told her that "if you want to come clean, you better tell the truth now." She talked with the detective again and stuck to her original account of what happened. The police left, and she returned home with Gold, where she spent the night. At least some people involved in the case say that's when Gold had the perfect opportunity to coach Wilee to lie, to manipulate his much younger ex-girlfriend into telling a false story that would help his longtime client, Hammons. Gold says that

scenario is simply not accurate and that the night she spent at his place, nothing happened between them. They slept in the same bed, but that was all, he says.



Bad to the Bones: Ex-con Jeffrey Hammons.

Of course, Wilee offers a different version of what transpired in Gold's office. During Jeffrey Lee Hammons' preliminary hearing, she said that Gold encouraged her to lie about what happened. She claimed that Gold told her to say that a Good Samaritan saved her, a story that makes Wilee the victim and takes Hammons out of the picture. Nearly a week after she fabricated her story, she called detective Mike Chastain and said she wanted to meet him face to face.

"I felt bad for Brandon over what happened to him," she said during the preliminary hearing, explaining her decision to finally tell the truth. Police later arrested Hammons.

But her cousin, Chris Woodall, who was at the meeting with Gold, says that the attorney never coached Wilee to lie to the police. He's still angry with his cousin for fabricating her story and says he even skipped out on a family gathering over Thanksgiving to avoid seeing her. "I will go to court and point her out and say that she is lying," he says. "David Gold did absolutely nothing wrong. She told him a story, and that's what he stuck with." Woodall adds Wilee is notoriously untrustworthy. "When I was 18, she said that one of my best friends raped her, and that turned out to be a big lie too."

The authorities, however, believed Wilee's story that Gold coached her to lie. They then had her call him three times to see if he would tip his hat. Around this time, Gold began to realize that Wilee's story was shakier than he thought and that Hammons might be involved. Police arrested him Nov. 4, where he remains in jail awaiting trial.

Wilee's first recorded call neither exonerates nor implicates Gold. She starts off telling him that a detective doubts her story. He encourages her to take a lie detector test if asked, but he also seems to warn her. "Remember who your allegiance is to." In a colossal error in judgment, Gold also tells his ex-girlfriend that he could represent both her and Hammons, even though he must have realized that it was a clear conflict of interest.

In the second recorded conversation, Wilee tells Gold that the police still don't believe her. He says it won't be a big deal if she's caught lying. She asks him "what if I just tell them the truth?"

"Then, you're well, you know what will happen." That seems like a subtle way to discourage her from implicating Hammons in the attack. Still, later in the conversation, Gold tells her that he would hate for her to harm someone who'd helped her, but "if you have to, then that's your decision." By the second phone call, Gold still hadn't said anything incriminating.

On Nov. 6, a Saturday, not long after his second conversation with Wilee, Gold says that he met with Hammons in jail and learned more about what happened that night. Citing attorney-client privilege, Gold won't detail what he learned, but suffice to say that if he ever believed Wilee's story, he then realized it wasn't true. Still, when Wilee called him a third time on Monday saying that she was ready to take a polygraph test, Gold told her, "You're going to stick to the same story you've stuck to all along, and we expect them to say we don't believe you." Here, Gold knew that Wilee's story was false but encouraged her to repeat it anyway.

Gold told his client that he was coming down to the police station, but when he arrived, detective Mike Chastain met with him. Later, deputy district attorney general Tom Thurman told Gold they had him on tape telling Wilee to lie. The young attorney was visibly shaken.

Gold says that Thurman told him that already he was on the hook for filing false reports, subornation of aggravated perjury and accessory after the fact. "And I can make sure this case goes before Judge Blackburn," Gold recalls him saying, which he felt was a case of the prosecutor judge shopping. Thurman denies ever saying that.

On Nov. 8, Thurman told Gold he had a few days to take a plea bargain or be arrested and face trial. It was the darkest day in his young legal career.

"The first thing I thought about was suicide," Gold says. "My second reaction was, 'I still have a lot things going for me and a lot of people who love me.'" Gold was friends with the late Greg Clayton, the former Metro police officer-turned-attorney. Last February, Clayton fatally shot his estranged girlfriend in Hermitage before killing himself. "I saw the similarities," he said, comparing his situation to Clayton's. "But I didn't want to go out like Greg because I hadn't done anything illegal."

Gold later contacted defense attorney David Raybin, and together the pair worked out a plea. Gold would plead guilty to accessory after the fact to especially aggravated robbery, a Class E felony, and begin a two-year sentence in December, which would be suspended after 90 days behind bars. He'll be on probation for the remainder of the two years.

Both Gold and Raybin agree that had they gone to trial, they might have had a chance to beat the charges. The evidence that Gold originally told Wilee to lie is shakier than a twig in a hurricane. But even if they could discredit Wilee, the recorded phone calls, especially the last one, show that Gold was at least coaxing her to tell a story that wasn't true.

"I know what I did was unethical," he says. "But I don't think it was illegal."

Gold now says that as Wilee's attorney he didn't want to expose her to criminal charges that might come if she detailed her night of recreational drug use. At the same time, he was trying to protect his other client, Jeffrey Hammons.

"He sat in my office and cried terribly over this—at the wrongness of what he did, not his plight," Raybin says of Gold. "A lot of people cry in my office over what's going to happen to them, but he was upset over what he did."

Raybin says that the deck was stacked against Gold. "I've represented several lawyers on appeal, and lawyers just don't fare well before juries when they're the defendants," says Raybin, who spoke to the *Scene* with Gold's permission. "David's case presented the worst example of what people's perceptions are of lawyers. It's easy to knock this woman's credibility. It's difficult to overcome David's own words."

Meanwhile, Wilee isn't likely to face criminal charges, even though she was responsible for a chain of events that disfigured a young man for life and put her attorney in jail. She took Xanax recreationally, exposed her child to danger, called an ex-con to intimidate an innocent man and then, later that day, lied to the police. But because she gave up both Hammons and Gold, the authorities went easy on her.

Raybin says that his client made a mistake in judgment, but he's convinced that his client only had the best of intentions and that, within two years, he should be able to practice law again.

"It was like David was in a burning house and he didn't know which child to save first. So he tried to save them both and saved neither. And he was burnt up in the fire as well."