

## 'Wrongfully accused' ADA rebuilds career as defense attorney



George N. Papachristos in the series 'How to Fix a Drug Scandal' (Photo courtesy of Netflix)

### Sees Netflix show as final break with Dookhan link

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It isn't exactly how Milton attorney George N. Papachristos envisioned his big break on the small screen. But after all he's been through, he wouldn't have it any other way.

By devoting a significant portion of the second episode of the Netflix series "How to Fix a Drug Scandal" to the long-misunderstood relationship between himself and disgraced state drug lab chemist Annie Dookhan, Papachristos feels like the cloud he has been living under since resigning from the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office is finally lifting.

Dookhan was sentenced to three to five years in prison and two years' probation on Nov. 22, 2013, after pleading guilty to having falsified drug tests at the Hinton drug lab. In 2017, the Supreme Judicial Court dismissed 21,587 cases in which Dookhan's involvement invalidated the reliability of drug certificates.

Over time, the conventional wisdom has be-

"It wasn't easy, but it taught me a lot about life," he says.

Growing up, Papachristos wanted to be an actor or a lawyer. His parents favored the latter, more stable career path, but Papachristos didn't want to relinquish his acting dreams before giving them an honest shot.

So, after graduating from college, he headed to Los Angeles. His first "break" came when he was hired as an extra in the 2001 Mark Wahlberg film "Rock Star."

Look closely in one of the film's opening scenes, and Papachristos can be spotted in a frenzied throng having water spat on it by the lead singer of a fictional heavy metal band.

"I sat on that set for two days, 14 hours straight, listening to the same song," he recalls.

Papachristos had brief encounters with both Wahlberg and the film's other star, Jennifer Aniston, who told him that her godfather, also Greek, was working on the film.

But it was tough for his parents to have him so far away, and after about a year, Papachristos heeded their call to come home. Of course, that's when his phone rang. If he would fly back to L.A., there was an audition for a speaking role on the popular police procedural "NYPD Blue" waiting, his agent told him.

But when he talked to his parents about the opportunity, his mom went "crazy," and his dad laid down the law, Papachristos says. Just like that, the curtain came down on his acting career.

As he headed to law school, Papachristos still harbored thoughts of one day returning to Tinseltown as a "high-priced entertainment lawyer." What began to adjust his focus was an internship in the Quincy District Court Clerk's Office.

"I loved working with the staff at the court, and I felt that there was maybe something I could do to somehow make a difference," Papachristos says.

Not only that, but he says he came to be every bit as "star struck" by the prosecutors who came into the office as he had been by Wahlberg and Aniston.

"Every time an assistant district attorney used to come to the Clerk's Office, I was like a little kid," he says.

run that was 30 seconds too slow might have kept him from landing a position with the DEA in 2010, he says.

### Unwanted attention

According to Papachristos, the only time he and Dookhan met face to face came as he was preparing for a trial in which a defense attorney was raising an issue related to the weight of the substance that had been tested in the Hinton state drug lab.

To maintain the lab's security, Papachristos had to be escorted to the area where he met with Dookhan. They worked through the issue in the case, and that was that.

But, as the world came to discover, Papachristos and Dookhan continued to communicate by email, with each interspersing references to their personal lives with business matters.

When Dookhan began to allude to problems in her marriage, Papachristos gave words of support. In an Aug. 10, 2009, email, he offered to be "a caring ear in case you needed to vent." To Papachristos, he was being his normal, gregarious self.

"At the time, I didn't think anything of it at all," he says.

As Papachristos would later tell police, around the same time, Dookhan's husband texted him — not to accuse Papachristos of having an affair with his wife, as was suggested in the initial reporting — but to warn him about her penchant for lying and insatiable need for sympathy and attention.

Reporters at The Boston Globe got their hands on the emails as part of their continuing coverage of the state drug lab scandal in the fall of 2012.

Stripped of their context, the emails give the impression that Dookhan and Papachristos were involved romantically, acknowledges Papachristos, who's single. But things snowballed once those reporters began to ask suggestive questions — "did

self-medicate with alcohol, he says. Life's daily tasks became a struggle.

Papachristos says he thought about quitting the law and moving to Greece. He even pondered whether he wanted to continue to live.

What brought him back, first and foremost, were his parents, who took care of him and also served as inspiration, Papachristos says.

"My parents are both immigrants that came here with essentially nothing. My mom became a school teacher in Boston public schools, my dad opened up his restaurant — they became self-sufficient," Papachristos says. "So I didn't want to just give up."

Papachristos says he also had "behind the scenes" support from a prominent member of the legal community, whom he declines to name.

"He took my hand and said, 'You have to keep fighting. I'm going to help you, but you're going to need to help to learn and to build and to develop guts, because this business isn't for everybody,'" Papachristos says. The mentor also told Papachristos to wear the media attention as a badge of honor.

"He said, 'You're not going to be a good litigator unless you find yourself in the news at some point in your career.'"

Slowly, Papachristos began to build up a solo criminal defense practice. But he says he still had a "demon" on his back: the ever-present fear that he would walk into a courtroom and someone would say, "There's the guy who was sleeping with Dookhan."

"I was judged by my peers, I was judged by the press, and I still kept fighting. Now, when people come to me, I understand, and I'm very empathetic."

— George N. Papachristos



you hear about Annie and George?" — around the courthouse, he says.

To know Papachristos was to know the innuendo was not true, says Gordon, who coincidentally represented Dookhan in her criminal case.

"Anyone who knew George at all knew there was no way he did anything improper, unethical or inappropriate," Gordon says.

The Netflix documentary highlights one email that — had its true nature been discerned in the initial reporting — might have spared Papachristos considerable grief.

The email appeared to be from an assistant U.S. attorney. It referred, inaccurately, to Dookhan being divorced and also fostered the impression that her friend thought Dookhan would be quite the catch.

But in reality, Dookhan had created the email herself, apparently to pique Papachristos' curiosity. It was evidence — not of an affair, but of the depths to which Dookhan would take her duplicity.

Hours after The Globe published its initial story on the emails on Oct. 17, 2012, Papachristos tendered his resignation. As Norfolk DA Michael W. Morrissey told the newspaper, Papachristos had done nothing wrong, but they agreed that he had become enough of a distraction that continuing his work would be impossible.

But his resignation did not end the negative attention.

### Long road back

Papachristos says, for a while, the press was "all over the place," trying to find him. For months, whenever Dookhan's name was brought up, his was as well, he says.

Moreover, Papachristos had been set adrift from a line of work that had formed much of his identity.

"I had lost the sense of what I believed to be my reality," he says.

The ordeal caused anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress, which led him to

"I would have been destroyed," Papachristos says. "As much as that wasn't a reality, it was in the back of my mind."

Gordon says he reconnected with Papachristos about three years ago, after a chance meeting in Quincy District Court. Since then, they have developed a more extensive working relationship. They are currently serving as co-counsel in a pair of Suffolk Superior Court attempted murder cases.

Gordon calls Papachristos a "brilliant attorney," one who is always extremely well prepared and thinks outside the box.

"If I had a family member who had a legal issue tomorrow, I wouldn't hesitate to refer him to George, and I would sleep well at night knowing that his fate was in George's hands," Gordon says.

Now, with the Netflix segment, Papachristos feels like he can move onward and upward with building his practice.

Moreover, Papachristos says his experience of having been "wrongfully accused" has helped him come to relish his new role as a criminal defense attorney, one that would have been unthinkable to the zealous ADA and wannabe FBI or DEA agent.

"I was judged by my peers, I was judged by the press, and I still kept fighting," he says. "Now, when people come to me, I understand, and I'm very empathetic."

Taking on his clients' pain does raise the stakes, and it can be hard to separate himself from the outcomes of their cases, Papachristos says. The struggles with anxiety also come and go.

"But overall, [the Dookhan experience] made me a better person," Papachristos says. "And if you were to ask me, I would not take that experience back."



George N. Papachristos (shown with his father, Nicholas) credits his parents with helping him emerge from a dark period that had him contemplating leaving the legal profession.

come that Dookhan wanted to burnish her own professional achievements and be seen as a valued member of the prosecution team. But some early reporting also pointed to a more salacious contributing factor.

In the years since, Papachristos has had the constant fear that he would walk into a courtroom and someone would revive the mistaken notion that he and Dookhan were romantically involved.

"For literally eight years I had to practice with that monkey on my back, and I don't know what kept me going," he says.

Now, the 44-year-old Papachristos says he feels newly invigorated to continue down a professional road that the Dookhan episode sent him involuntarily.

But it was never supposed to be this way.

### Finding a calling

The older of two sons of Greek immigrants, Papachristos began working at his parents' restaurant, the Weymouth institution Niko's, as a teen and continued to do so through law school. As a young man, he knew partying with friends late into the night would be no excuse not to be at his father's side at the grill a few hours later.

Favorable recommendations from the Clerk's Office helped Papachristos get his foot in the door at the Norfolk DA's Office. Grateful for the opportunity, Papachristos tried to make the most of it. He found the fast-paced work exhilarating.

"Some days I used to go home, and I swear I didn't know what had happened earlier in the morning," he says.

Mansfield criminal defense attorney Nicolas A. Gordon, who had started work as a Norfolk ADA a few months before Papachristos, says it was not uncommon to find Papachristos as the sole person in the office on a Sunday afternoon.

He came to wear "four hats" for the DA's Office, including supervisor of the Dedham District Court and member of the major felony and motor vehicle homicide units. In the latter role, Papachristos would get dispatched to crime scenes and work side by side with police investigators, which helped fuel a desire to carry a badge of his own.

As much as he enjoyed working as an ADA, Papachristos also was keeping his eyes open for opportunities with the FBI, Drug Enforcement Agency or Secret Service. In fact, only a two-mile