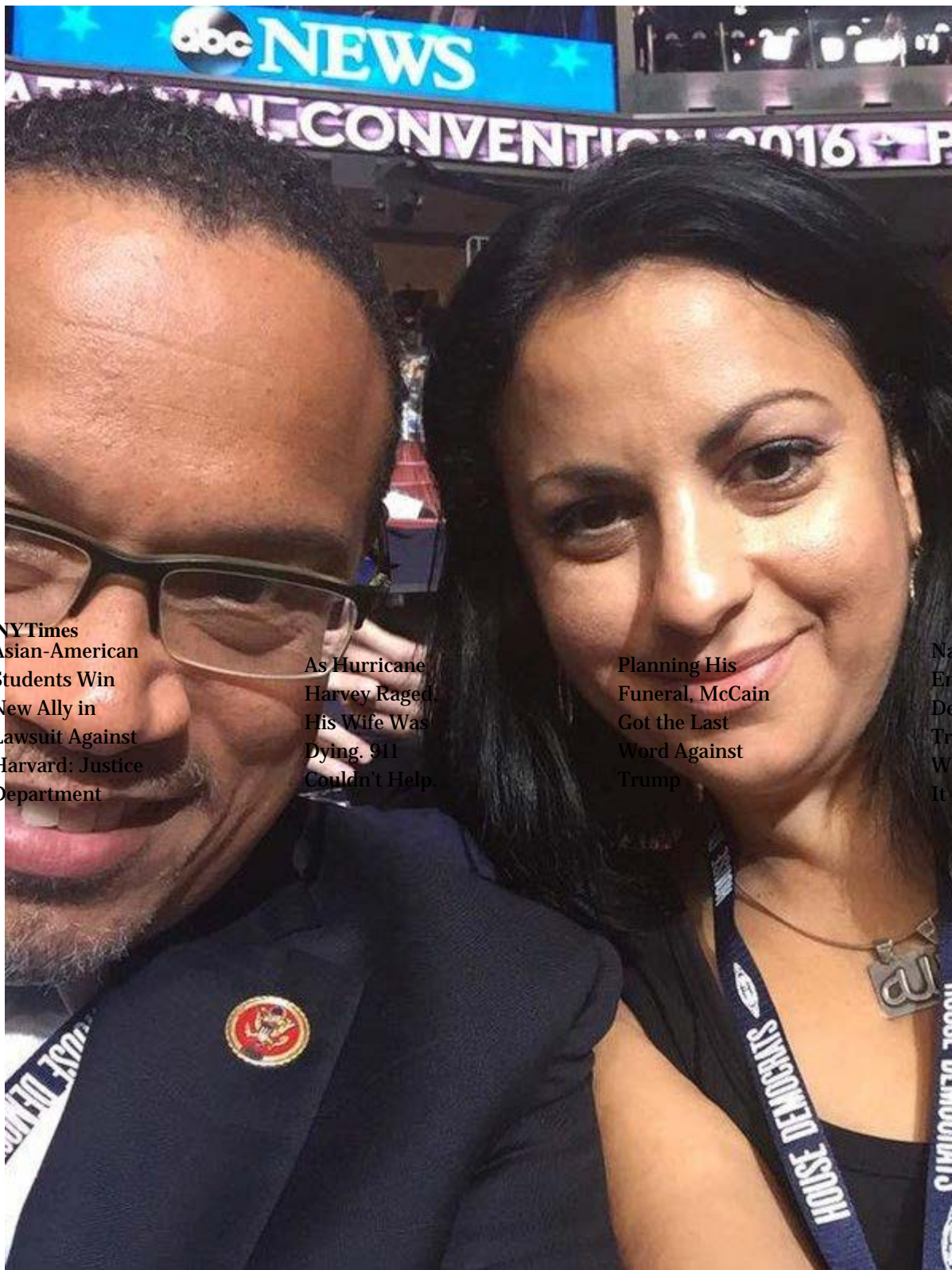

A Broken Relationship and Accusations of Emotional Abuse: The Case of Keith Ellison



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Representative Keith Ellison and Karen Monahan in a photo posted to Ms. Monahan's Facebook account in July 2016.

By **Julie Turkewitz** and **Farah Stockman**

Aug. 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — When Keith Ellison became the first Muslim elected to Congress in 2006, it made him an instant national star: a charismatic young black leader who was now a symbol of the Democratic Party’s commitment to diversity and equal rights.

Back home in Minneapolis, Mr. Ellison was revered in a close-knit circle of progressive activists. He began a romantic relationship with one of them, an environmental organizer named Karen Monahan, who later moved in with him in 2015.

Ms. Monahan posted happy photos on social media of the two of them hiking, traveling and even attending a party at the White House with President Barack Obama and the first lady.

Behind the scenes, though, their relationship was rocky. Ms. Monahan often accused Mr. Ellison of cheating on her, leading to blowout arguments, according to more than a dozen people who knew the couple.

Now, as Mr. Ellison runs for attorney general in Minnesota, Ms. Monahan has accused her former boyfriend of emotional abuse and says he once shouted profanities at her, while trying to drag her off a bed.

Mr. Ellison denies abusing Ms. Monahan and said in a statement after the allegations emerged that he cares “deeply for her well-being.” Democratic Party leaders in Minnesota have asked a lawyer to look into Ms. Monahan’s allegations, but continue to support Mr. Ellison’s bid to become attorney general.

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The questions around Mr. Ellison come eight months after Senator Al Franken, another popular progressive leader in Minnesota, resigned amid allegations that he made unwanted sexual advances. Now, Mr. Ellison, a high-profile leader on the left, is fighting for his reputation and facing a tough campaign with an opponent using the abuse allegations against him.

Ms. Monahan's accusations represent a potentially new chapter in the #MeToo movement in which the allegations against a public figure are not primarily about sexual violence or harassment, but emotional abuse. But the allegations against Mr. Ellison, who declined a request for an interview through a spokesman, are turning into a test among many liberals for where to draw the line between a messy relationship and an emotionally abusive one, and some say they aren't sure where it is.

"I want to make sure that women are believed," said Betsy Hodges, a former mayor of Minneapolis who identifies as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and who used to see Mr. Ellison, 55, and Ms. Monahan, 44, together at political events. "I also want to make sure that we follow a process when we evaluate. A bad breakup is not the same thing as abuse."

'Narcissist Abuse'

Ms. Monahan's accusation about the altercation on the bed has drawn the most attention. Yet the core of her allegations against Mr. Ellison regard what she calls "narcissist abuse," a term that is not officially recognized in psychiatry but that is gaining popularity online as a way to describe suffering experienced by partners of self-centered people.



Mr. Ellison campaigning in Woodbury, Minn., on Friday. Ms. Monahan has accused her former boyfriend of emotional abuse, an allegation he has denied. Tim Gruber for The New York Times

“Narcissist abuse is very difficult to understand,” said Ms. Monahan in a recent interview. “It’s the gaslighting, it’s the habitual lying, it’s the making it seem like it was my fault for even asking why something happened.”

“It was crazy-making,” she said. “My hair was falling out, I was anemic — narcissist abuse is horrid.”

Born in Iran, Ms. Monahan said she was adopted by a working-class family in Texas. As a child, she said, she experienced sexual abuse. She gave birth to a son when she was a teenager. Ms. Monahan said her experience with adversity inspired her to become an activist.

Around 2006, when she worked at a small organization called the Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota, she met Mr. Ellison, a married state legislator. His office was just down the hall from hers, and they became friends.

In 2010, Mr. Ellison and his wife, Kim Ellison, separated and eventually divorced. Ms. Ellison said in an interview that they remain close and that she has never seen him behave abusively. In 2015, Ms. Monahan moved in with Mr. Ellison and his teenage daughter, Amirah.

Amirah said in [a public Facebook post](#) that Ms. Monahan “quickly became actively territorial and threatening towards me.” Once, when she came home from college, Amirah said, she found that her bedroom had been turned into a storage closet for Ms. Monahan’s things and that Ms. Monahan falsely accused her of destroying her possessions.

“Many people — including, probably, many people reading these words — believe Karen,” Amirah wrote. “That reality both gives me hope for the beautiful momentum that the #metoo movement has built, and a profound anger at the injustice of these false accusations. But Karen Monahan is exploiting a movement.”

Ms. Monahan said Amirah’s account was untrue.

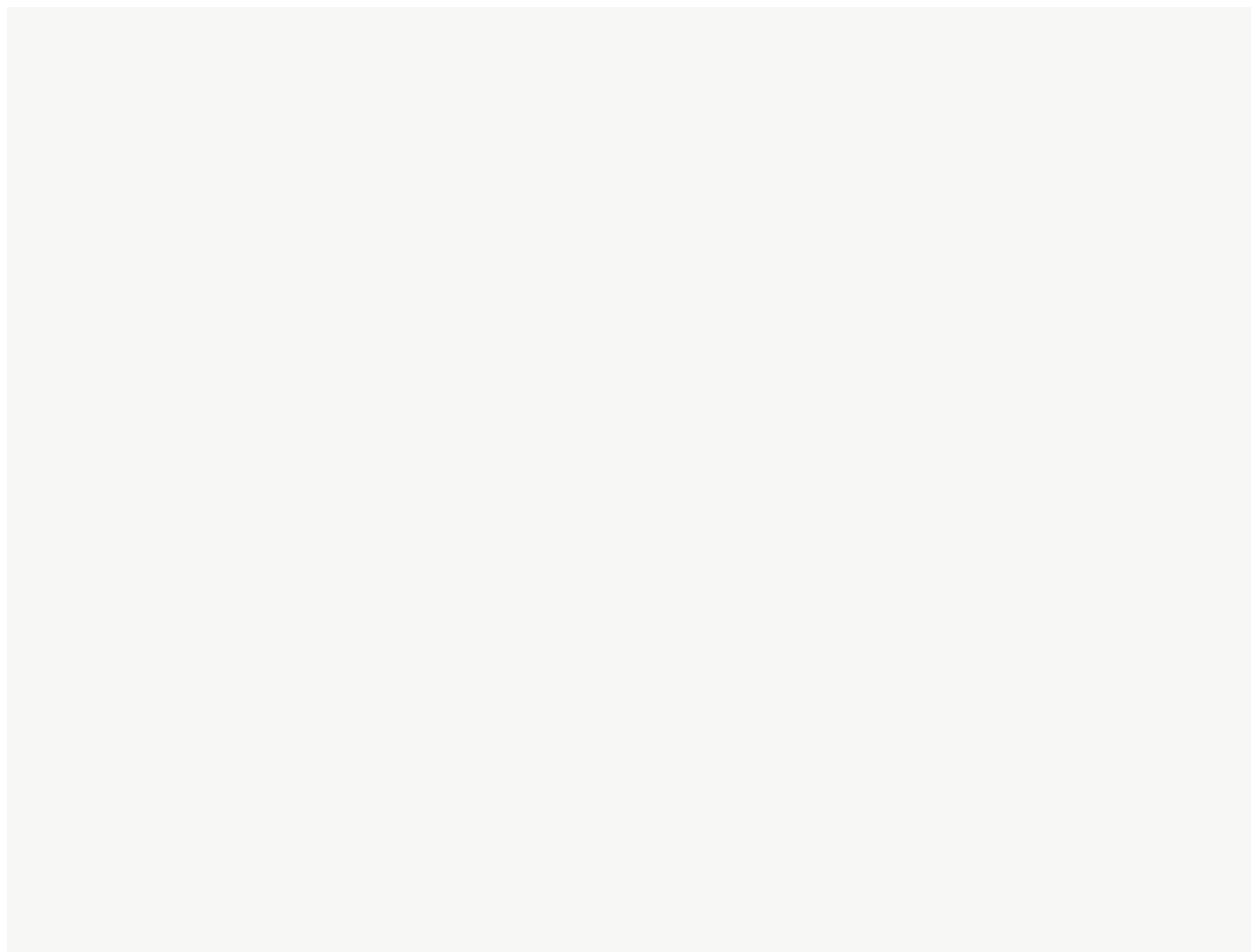
In the summer of 2016, about a year after Ms. Monahan moved in, Mr. Ellison began to tell his friends that the relationship wasn’t working out. That August, Mr. Ellison attended a conference on transgender issues and then met with a female friend to talk to her about legal papers she had received from her ex-husband. Ms. Monahan accused him of cheating, recalled Shay Berkowitz, a friend of Mr. Ellison’s who has volunteered for his campaigns.

“They didn’t bring out the best in each other,” she said, adding that the relationship ended at that time, but Ms. Monahan remained in his house until she could get her own place.

It was after that fight that Ms. Monahan alleges that she was lying down on a bed and listening to a podcast episode when Mr. Ellison asked her to take out the trash. When she did not respond verbally, he grew angry, she said.

In a profanity-laced tirade, she said he asked her to leave and called her a bad guest.

“He kept trying to pull me and pull me and pull me off” the bed, she said. “And I just laid dead. Because I was scared.”



“Narcissist abuse is very difficult to understand,” Karen Monahan said. Tim Gruber for The New York Times

Mr. Ellison left to catch a flight, she said, but warned her to be gone when he returned.

Ms. Monahan claimed to have a cellphone video of the incident, but has so far declined to make it available to reporters. She told CNN that she misplaced it, but wrote on Facebook that she would not provide it because victims should not be forced to prove their claims. Shortly after she made the allegation, Ms. Monahan called the police and alleged that her computer had been hacked and “that email conversations between her and Ellison have been randomly deleted off of her laptop,” according to the police report.

Ms. Monahan said that after the alleged incident, she borrowed money to pay

the deposit on her own place, but did not consider the relationship to be over until January 2017, when she discovered text messages on Mr. Ellison's phone to two other women.

She sent him screenshots of the messages, and accused him of "soul-rape," according to text messages she posted later on social media. She told him she might write a memoir about their relationship. He warned her not to violate his privacy.

A Career Blow

Around this time, Mr. Ellison appeared on the verge of gaining a powerful new role as chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

With the party reeling in the aftermath of the 2016 election, progressives like Mr. Ellison and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont argued that Democrats needed new leaders who would craft a more populist pitch to win back voters.

Mr. Ellison, who had the support of leaders like Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, seemed on track to win. But D.N.C. members ultimately chose former Labor Secretary Tom Perez.

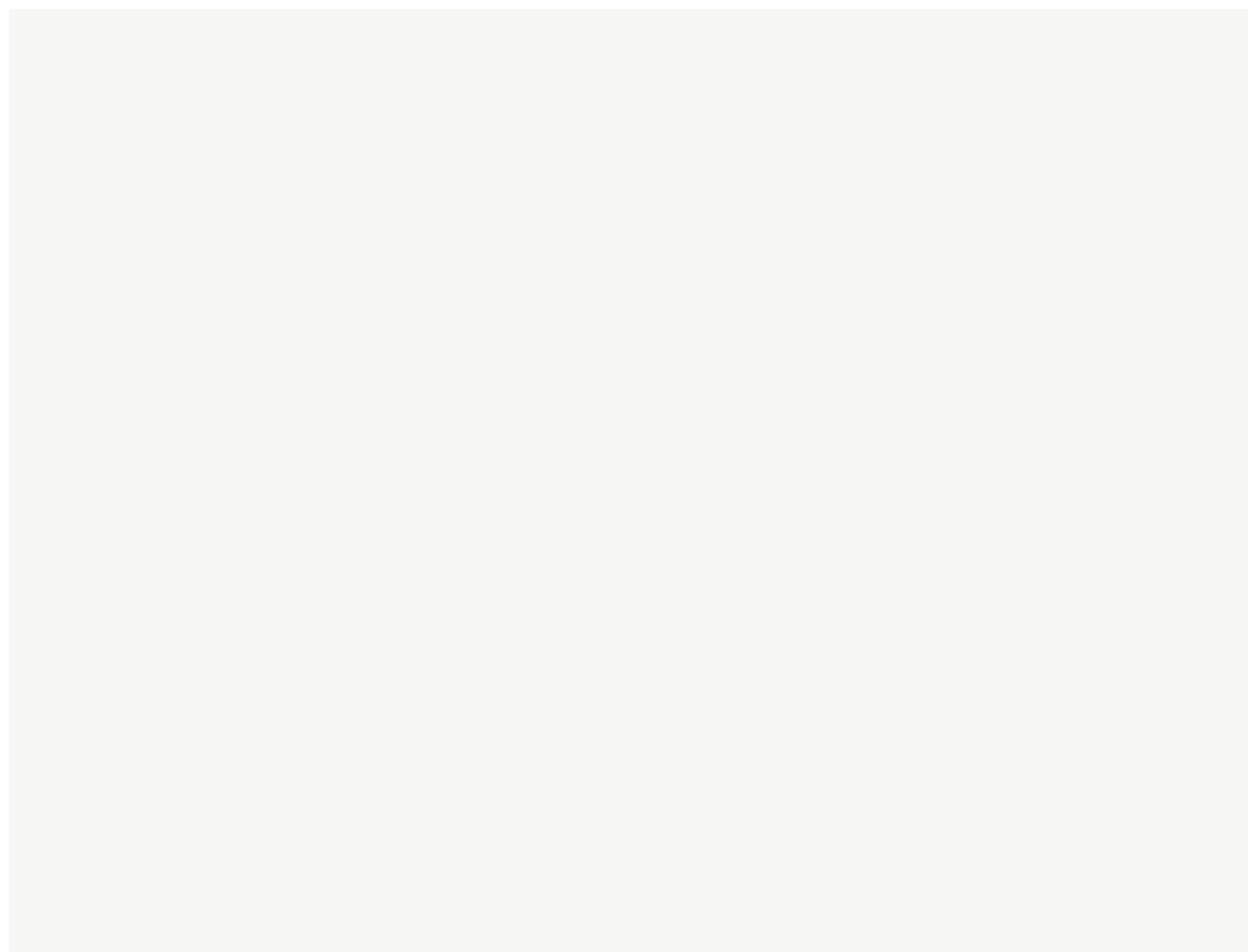
The loss was personally devastating for Mr. Ellison, said Kim Bettie, a high school sweetheart who had just rekindled a romance with the congressman.

"He said he was going to a dark place and did not want to take me there," recalled Ms. Bettie, who said Mr. Ellison abruptly broke up with her after losing the D.N.C. election.

She said she had never seen Mr. Ellison be abusive, although she was hurt by his sudden change of heart. After Ms. Monahan went public with her abuse allegations, Ms. Bettie thanked her publicly on Facebook for trying to warn other women about him.

Mr. Ellison's current girlfriend, Monica Hurtado, said she had only seen him treat women with respect.

“Karen is suffering. She is a victim — not of Keith, but of others during her childhood,” Ms. Hurtado said. “Keith has been very clear in saying that nobody is out of the circle of compassion and that includes Karen.”



Monica Hurtado, Mr. Ellison’s current girlfriend, campaigned with him in Woodbury on Friday. Ms. Hurtado said she had only seen him treat women with respect. Tim Gruber for The New York Times

About a year after the breakup, Ms. Monahan sent an email to Ms. Hurtado, accusing her of stealing Mr. Ellison’s affections.

“Your desires, and how you acted on those desires, in this whole situation had nothing to do with Keith’s wellbeing,” Ms. Monahan wrote. “You thought of your needs, what you wanted, your desires, and it didn’t matter who you hurt.”

In recent months, Ms. Monahan has posted [almost daily on social media](#) about being a survivor of “narcissist abuse.”

“Today is world narcissist abuse day,” she wrote on Twitter in June, tagging Mr.

Ellison's account. "Please raise awareness about this destructive form of abuse."

She continued to call on Mr. Ellison for assistance in text messages seen by The New York Times. In May, she contacted him when she ran out of gas on the highway. And in June, she sought a meeting with him to discuss the case of a pregnant woman, who she said had unjustly been sent to prison.

Ms. Monahan's supporters point out that Mr. Ellison faced a similar accusation in 2006, when another young environmental activist alleged that she had an affair with Mr. Ellison while he was married. That woman, Amy Alexander, said he came to her house, shoved her and broke a screen door as he left. Mr. Ellison has denied having a romantic relationship with Ms. Alexander, and won a restraining order against her in court. A judge warned her not to repeat her claims. Attempts to contact Ms. Alexander were not successful.

Supporters of Mr. Ellison say Ms. Alexander's allegations, which came out in a Republican newspaper three weeks before he was elected to Congress, were politically motivated. They also say the timing of Ms. Monahan's allegations — just days before the Democratic primary — suggests a desire to harm him politically. Even those who say they believe Ms. Monahan have publicly urged her to release the video.

Despite the allegations, Mr. Ellison won his primary. Now he faces Doug Wardlow, a Republican who has already made an issue out of the allegations.

"Minnesota Democrats have preached that we must believe domestic violence victims," he posted on [his website](#). "That is, until it is one of their own."

Melody Hoffmann, a feminist activist who has voted for Mr. Ellison in the past, said she refused to cast a ballot for him this time. She acknowledged that men who have been accused of rape and workplace harassment might have been "lumped together" with those who had bad dates or relationships that just went sour.

"Unfortunately, this wave of women being believed is so new, we haven't figured out how to nuance it," she said. But if that was the cost of the public reckoning about the abuse of women, she said, it was worth it.

Doris Burke and Alain Delaquérière contributed research.

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