



Eli Kassirer at home in New Paltz, New York. His daughter Lauren died under mysterious circumstances in July 2018.

Photographer: Tiffany Hagler-Geard/Bloomberg

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| Feature

Father Says Airbnb Aid After Daughter's Death Was Damage Control

Company provided money and support when a New York high school teacher was found unconscious in a rented villa in Mexico. Her father now says the family was caught up in an effort to avoid a 'public relations nightmare.'

By

[Olivia Carville](#)

July 20, 2021, 4:00 AM CDT

Lauren Kassirer, a 35-year-old New York City high school teacher, was found naked, bruised, and near death in an [Airbnb](#) rental on the Yucatan Peninsula three years ago this month. Now, with no answers about how she died and no one arrested, her father is looking back at the company's offers of help and wondering if he got caught up in a damage-control campaign.

"They took advantage of our family's vulnerability to avoid a public relations nightmare," said Eli Kassirer, 74, sitting at his kitchen table in New Paltz, New York, in late June, surrounded by documents about the case and a box containing his daughter's ashes. He said he decided to speak publicly for the

first time after reading a story in Bloomberg Businessweek last month about how the company handles violent crimes at its listings, providing victims and their families with money and working hard to deflect bad publicity. He said he regrets that he followed Airbnb's advice to delay talking to the media and worries that other young women may suffer as a result of lax safety practices at short-term rentals. But he doesn't blame Airbnb for Lauren's death, and his anger is also directed at what he views as a shoddy investigation by local authorities who didn't examine the scene and misplaced evidence.

Kassirer said Airbnb offered its government connections to assist in the investigation and paid for private investigators and lawyers. The company covered about \$250,000 in expenses, including funeral costs, and sent the family a check for an additional \$750,000, according to people familiar with the matter who requested anonymity because settlement amounts are confidential. "It was a cynical, calculated, and manipulative attempt to keep us away from the media," Kassirer said.



Eli Kassirer holds a picture of himself with his daughter Lauren.

Photographer: Tiffany Hagler-Geard/Bloomberg

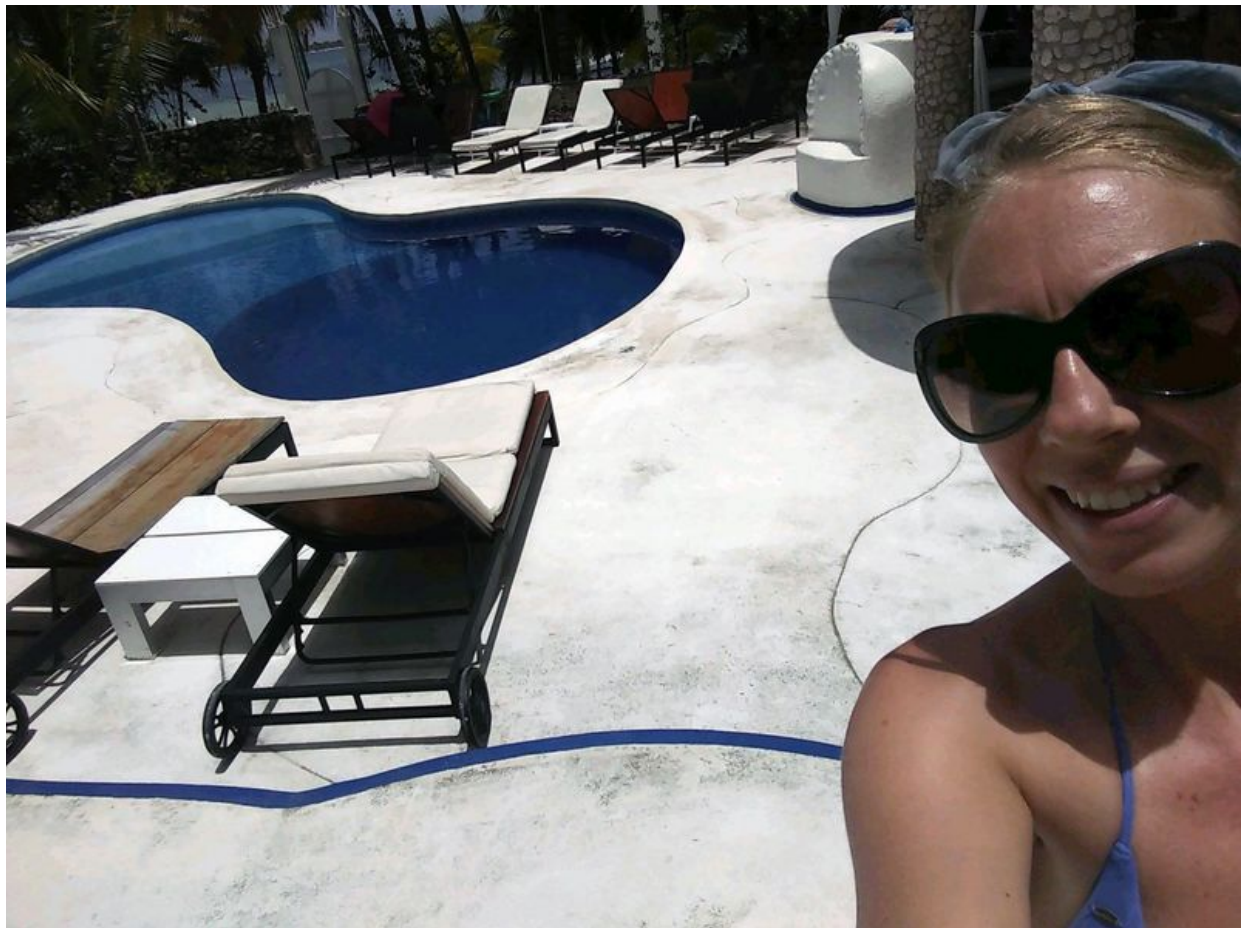
Ben Breit, an Airbnb spokesman, said the company's only priority was supporting the family after a "horrific" attack. He said there were no strings attached to the financial support. Nick Shapiro, Airbnb's head of crisis management at the time and a former deputy chief of staff at the Central Intelligence Agency, said that at the family's request he discussed the case with Mexican officials, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department, a member of Congress, and national media outlets. He also said he made sure that the settlement payout didn't prevent the family from speaking publicly about the case and that he arranged for Airbnb Chief Executive Officer Brian Chesky to call the family.

“I care deeply about the Kassirer family and did everything possible to help them,” Shapiro, who left the company in 2019 and now runs his own consulting firm, said in an email. He said the family decided not to go public because the FBI said media involvement could make it difficult for U.S. officials to get permission to enter Mexico to investigate, which “was what they wanted most.”

FBI agents did travel to Mexico and looked into the matter, according to documents seen by Bloomberg. A spokesman for the bureau said he could neither confirm nor deny the existence of an investigation. Breit said the company followed guidance from the FBI and “offered to help connect Lauren’s family to the media at a time of their choosing.”

Lauren’s parents tell a different story. While the payout agreement didn’t require them to keep silent about the case, and Airbnb never said it would withdraw support if they spoke publicly, they say they believed the money and offer of help with high-level government connections came in exchange for not talking about the company’s involvement. They say they feared that if they even mentioned that their daughter was found near death in an Airbnb rental or ignored the company’s suggestions about which private investigators to hire, or which journalists to approach and when, they would jeopardize that support and, ultimately, the chance to get justice for Lauren.

Airbnb has “a very sophisticated understanding of human psychology and behavior,” said Eli Kassirer, a retired high school principal. “This was all part of a strategy to keep us quiet, controlled, and happy. It was subtle coercion. They didn’t say, ‘If you go public, we are pulling funding,’ but to me it was very apparent that the support was part of a damage-control campaign.”



Lauren Kassirer took this selfie while vacationing at an Airbnb rental on the Yucatan Peninsula, days before she was found unconscious.

Courtesy: Eli Kassirer

Lauren's mother, Cathleen Sadler, who is divorced from Kassirer, agreed. "We all decided that we needed Airbnb and going to the media would distance us from the company that was helping us," she said in a telephone interview. "None of us were sure. We didn't know what we were doing."

Lauren Kassirer arrived in Mexico on June 27, 2018. She wanted to make the most of her summer vacation after a recent break-up with her high school sweetheart of 17 years. She took selfies on a beach in Tulum, went swimming with turtles, and sent a text message to a friend on July 1 saying she was sitting by the pool at a villa owned by the nearby Hotel Akumal Caribe, looking at the stars. "It is so quiet here," she wrote.

Later that night, she called a man in the U.S. she'd started dating a few weeks earlier to say she didn't feel safe at the Moroccan-style Villa Taj-Kumal, where she had rented a room through Airbnb, according to text messages he sent to Lauren's friend, Amanda Cadwallader. Usually a fiercely independent traveler, Kassirer said she felt creeped-out by an employee at the six-bedroom villa where she was the only guest. She said he'd been hitting on her, that she could see him watching her swimming through a window, and that she was going to lock herself in her bedroom, the text messages show.

A housekeeper found her lying on the floor of her room naked and unconscious at about 1:30 the next afternoon, according to a person familiar with the Ministry of Criminal Investigations file. Police weren't called to the scene. Villa staff washed and dressed Kassirer, and a local doctor transported her to a hospital in Playa del Carmen.

The hospital is a 30-minute drive from the property, but Kassirer didn't arrive until 6 p.m., hospital records show. She'd suffered from a brain injury resulting from a lack of oxygen but was still alive. She had a dislocated left knee, genital injuries, cuts inside her mouth, bruises on her arms, inner thighs, torso and pelvis, red marks on her knuckles, and redness on her wrists, according to the records. The investigative file states probable sexual assault, and one doctor said in police interviews that the redness on her wrists looked like ligature marks. The hospital requested a rape kit and started treating her for sexually transmitted diseases.

It was around 6:30 p.m. that evening in New Paltz when the U.S. Consulate in Mexico called Eli Kassirer. He drove to New York, got on a flight before midnight with his son and arrived at the hospital the following morning. He said he barely recognized Lauren because of the bruising to her face, and they arranged to airlift her to a hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. She arrived there the next day, July 4, her 36th birthday. More than a dozen neurologists assessed her condition and agreed she would never recover. She died on July 25, after 23 days in a coma.

Broward County Medical Examiner
5301 SW 31st Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33312

NAME:	Kassirer, Lauren	ME CASE NO.:	18-2172
SEX:	Female	DATE OF AUTOPSY:	July 26, 2018
RACE:	White	TIME OF AUTOPSY:	0830 hours
AGE:	36	EXAMINER:	Rebecca Mac Dougall, MD
DOB:	July 4, 1982		Associate Medical Examiner

Circumstances of Death: By report, the decedent was discovered in her Airbnb room in a decreased level of consciousness. She was transported to the local hospital and subsequently air lifted to Fort Lauderdale Florida. She was diagnosed with anoxic brain injury and pronounced 3 weeks after her arrival to the United States.

Authorization for Autopsy: Florida Statute 406

Identification: By family

Cause of Death: UNDETERMINED

Manner of Death: COULD NOT BE DETERMINED

The Broward County Medical Examiner report lists the cause and manner of Lauren Kassirer's death as "undetermined."

Source: Broward County Medical Examiner

The cause and manner of death are listed as "undetermined" in the autopsy report by Broward County Medical Examiner Rebecca MacDougall. The injuries seen on photographs taken in Mexico were healed, MacDougall noted, and a review of medical records revealed no severe injuries. "That does not rule out the possibility of assault," she wrote, "but the time lapse between the event and her death, the lack of information regarding the circumstances, no scene investigation, and having no specimens available for testing make it impossible to put a complete story together as to what exactly happened in Mexico."

It took MacDougall a year to sign off on the report because, she said in a phone interview, she was hoping more information would come to light about what happened. MacDougall enlisted the help of the FBI because she never saw any photos of the crime scene, there were conflicting stories about how and where Lauren was found, and she didn't have access to the rape kit results or DNA specimens. The only injury left on her body when MacDougall conducted the autopsy, she said, was a healing abrasion on her pubic bone. "There was no way to know what happened," MacDougall said. "If we had an adequate investigation by the Mexican authorities, then it might have been an easier case to deal with."

Airbnb first heard about what happened from the host who listed the property, according to a former safety agent for the company who was involved in the case and asked for anonymity because of an employment-related confidentiality agreement. The host said Lauren had slipped in the shower, recalled the agent, who was part of an elite team that handles incidents involving serious bodily harm or crime inside Airbnb listings.

A few days later a cousin of Lauren's called Airbnb to say she had been assaulted and was on life support, according to the safety agent. The cousin told Airbnb that an employee at the property was a

suspect. The company removed the Villa Taj-Kumal and other listings owned by Hotel Akumal Caribe from its platform and permanently banned the host. Representatives of the hotel didn't respond to emails and phone calls seeking comment.



The room at Villa Taj-Kumal where Lauren was found.

Source: Airbnb.com

Three months after Lauren's death, her mother, father, and two siblings decided they were ready to go public, according to emails among family members seen by Bloomberg. They thought media pressure could help speed up the investigation, and they wanted to raise awareness about the dangers of women traveling alone. They discussed reaching out to NBC, the New York Times, and daytime talk show Dr. Phil, the emails show.

They had lengthy conference calls with Airbnb's Shapiro and Shep Bingham, a lawyer and uncle of Lauren's who was acting as the family's legal representative. Bingham said in an interview that the family didn't have the financial means to hire attorneys and private investigators in Mexico and that Airbnb was willing to pay for that. He said they decided not to engage in a media blitz against the company. "We asked for help," Bingham said. "They provided that help." The family was aware that Airbnb was a corporation that was going to try to protect its brand, Bingham said. "That translates more than anything else, ultimately, to dollars and cents."

In one October 2018 email, a family friend who worked in public relations suggested they agree to tell Airbnb that the company "will not be mentioned by the family in any media interviews." She said the family should come up with a "party-line" on how Lauren made her booking. "That is of course very much appreciated," Shapiro responded. "And also is important so the heat stays on the Mexican government and they can't scapegoat Airbnb or anyone else." Shapiro followed up with another email saying "the threat of media is worse than the actual news because of how short the life cycle of

these stories are.” He suggested the family delay going public until the newly elected Mexican government was in office later that year but added: “If you decide it is time to take it to the media, I am here to help.”

In November of that year, Shapiro sent another email to the family saying he had “personal friends” at 60 Minutes and the Today show he could connect them with. Again, he suggested delaying going public. “Let’s get the plan together before we discuss any more media outreach,” Shapiro wrote. That month, the family friend who worked in public relations drafted a two-page memo about what happened to Lauren to share with the media. Shapiro was copied on the emails. The document said the incident took place in a hotel room and didn’t mention Airbnb. It has never been shared with any media outlets, the family friend said.

Behind the scenes, the family was growing wary of Airbnb’s involvement. In an email that October, Eli Kassirer warned family members that the company has been “masterful at controlling and managing us.” Airbnb’s main interest, he wrote, “is to keep their name free of controversy and negative publicity.” That didn’t stop Kassirer from requesting additional financial support five months later to help launch a scholarship fund in Lauren’s name, writing in an email that Airbnb had been “very generous” and that he was “grateful” for the company’s support. That request led to the \$750,000 payout the family received in November 2019. The settlement agreement bars the family from suing the company and states that they agree the money is not an admission of wrongdoing on Airbnb’s part, according to people familiar with the matter.

In the end, the delays dragged on and no one was charged. Mexican authorities at the Quintana Roo state prosecutor’s office and the Municipal Ministry of Public Security and Transit in Tulum, didn’t respond to calls requesting comment. David Mark Mena Farca, a lawyer in Mexico representing the Kassirer family, said he has no idea if the prosecutor’s file is still open. He said the investigation has gone cold and evidence, including scrapings from Lauren’s fingernails, can’t be found. It’s “highly unlikely that anybody will get charged,” Farca said.

There’s no legal precedent for Airbnb’s potential liability for crimes that occur inside its listings, largely because the company’s terms of service pushes disputes with users into confidential arbitration. The few cases that have resulted in lawsuits have been settled before trial.

Since Lauren Kassirer’s death, at least two other women from the U.S. have been allegedly raped inside Airbnb listings in Mexico. Both were traveling alone.

In May 2019, a 56-year-old woman from Portland, Oregon, was attacked inside a two-story home in Colima, on the Pacific coast, after a man climbed up an unsecured staircase and broke in through an unlocked window while she slept. The intruder allegedly threatened to stab her with a metal fork and “in a brutal fashion, repeatedly and forcibly raped her,” according to a lawsuit filed against Airbnb in Oregon last year. The case has been stayed and shifted to arbitration because of Airbnb’s terms of service, according to court documents.

In January 2020, a man climbed through the open roof patio of an Airbnb apartment in Mexico, allegedly raped a Salt Lake City woman staying there and threatened to kill her, according to a safety agent who had knowledge of the case. During the attack, the man fell asleep on top of the woman, and she used her free arm to message her mother on Facebook, begging for help. The mother called Airbnb’s safety team and 911, and local police were sent to the property, the agent said. The man fled.

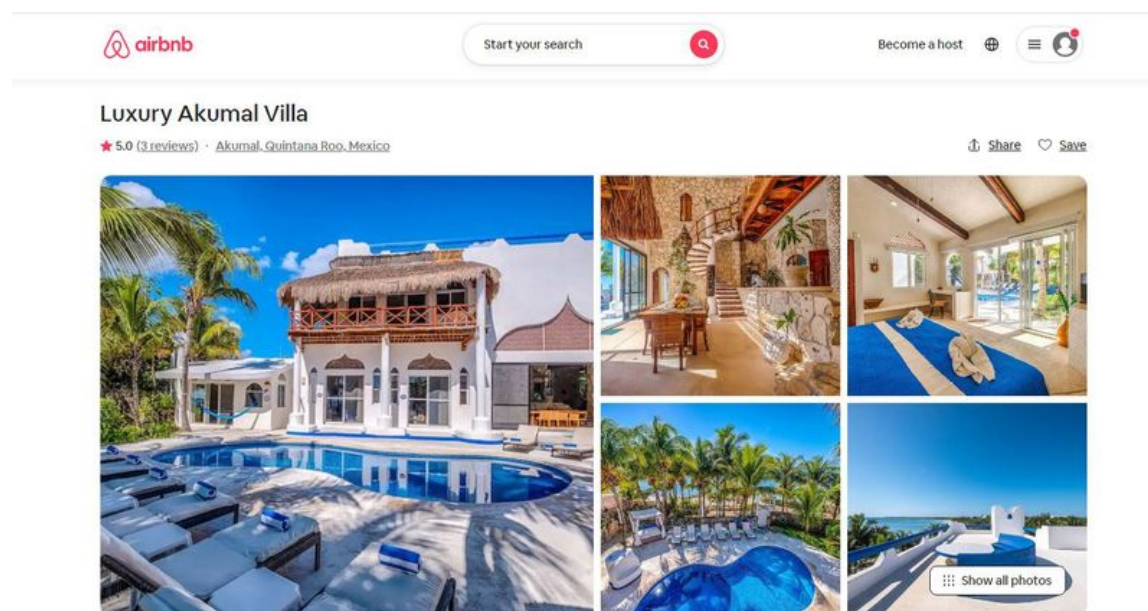
Breit, the company spokesman, called both cases “tragic” and said that Airbnb, which hasn’t previously been linked in the media to either incident, supported the survivors and their families. No criminal charges have been filed in either case. That’s not unusual for Mexico, where crimes against women

often aren't investigated. In May alone, 98 women were murdered in killings known as femicides, official data show. Investigators resolve only 1% of cases on average, according to Impunidad Cero, a nonpartisan organization.

"In Mexico, the rate of solving crimes is very low," said William Acosta, a private investigator hired by the Kassirer family to look into Lauren's death. "They do a substandard investigation, especially if a foreigner is involved." Acosta said he has been unable to get access to police files held by Mexican authorities. "It could take years, but sooner or later the truth will come out," he said.

Eli Kassirer has all but given up on his pursuit of justice. He decided to go public now because he said he felt he owed it to Lauren and hopes no one else will "ever experience the nightmare that we have been through." He particularly wants to reach adventurous young female travelers, like his daughter. "When you go to an Airbnb, you don't know whose home you are going to, who's been there before, who has the keys, or who has access to your room," he said. "This is a dangerous proposition, and you've got to think about it."

The Bloomberg story that prompted Kassirer to speak out shined a light on the safety challenges in the short-term rental industry, which was built by creating a sense of trust among strangers. It featured another violent sexual assault, this one in an Airbnb rental near Times Square early on New Year's Day in 2016. In that case, the alleged assailant had obtained a duplicate set of keys to the apartment. Several other travel companies have since updated their policies around key exchanges. Airbnb tightened its rules in 2019 to ensure that exchanges are made securely, but the new policy doesn't provide specifics.



The Villa Taj-Kumal was relisted on Airbnb earlier this year under a different name and with a five-star rating. Airbnb has since taken down the listing.

Source: [Airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com)

Airbnb says that less than 0.1% of stays result in a safety incident and that serious crimes are even rarer. In the past few years, the company has spent hundreds of millions of dollars enhancing its safety features, including adding a 911 safety button to its app to connect users with local police. "There is nothing more important than the safety of our community," said Breit, the Airbnb spokesman. "We are

deeply committed to helping everyone have a safe experience, particularly women who may be traveling alone.”

Earlier this year, the Villa Taj-Kumal popped back up on Airbnb’s platform under the name Luxury Akumal Villa. Seth Smith, who runs the property management company that hosted the listing, said in an interview that he had no idea what happened there in 2018 or that Airbnb had banned the property from its platform. The entire villa, including the room Lauren Kassirer rented, was available for \$800 a night.

When Bloomberg notified Airbnb last month that the property was back on its platform, it was removed within 24 hours. Breit said the company has systems in place to detect if a new host account is connected to a banned user and that the owner of the villa used “deceptive and possibly illegal tactics” to relist it through a property management firm. But the relisting is a clear example of how difficult it is for Airbnb to keep track of what’s going on with all of its 5.6 million listings around the world — even ones where terrible things happened. — With Justin Villamil and Ximena Del Cerro