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New doubt over arrest that ended a dream

By HUNTER ATKINS

It was a sunny Friday afternoon in May 2004 at the minor league ballpark in Lakewood, N.J. The Northeast Conference championship tournament was getting under way. Scouts from major league teams were there to track the talent.

Jared Williams, a sophomore for Wagner College, usually rode the bench. But with the starting right fielder ineligible for the tournament, he filled in.

“I was really focused,” Williams said. “When I hit the first home run, I was just satisfied with that. That had given us the lead. And then I got up to hit the second home run, and the crowd went crazy.”

Williams carried Wagner to a 9-4 victory over top-seeded Central Connecticut, the start to a run during which he broke the NEC tournament records for most stolen bases in a game and most total stolen bases.

Williams was a long shot to make it to the major leagues. He knew it; his coach at Wagner, Joe Litterio, knew it; the scouts very likely did, too. Still, long shots can come in. Scouts from the Baltimore Orioles, the Toronto Blue Jays and the Colorado Rockies thought enough of him to take formal note.

“If he ever put it all together,” Litterio said of Williams, “he could go to that next level and give it a shot.”

But Williams never made it past his junior baseball season, much less to the majors. On the night of Oct. 6, 2005, a young New York City police officer named Michael Daragjati effectively ended Williams’s hopes.

Williams and two other young African-Americans were arrested by Daragjati and his partner on suspicion of assaulting a man in a bar on Richmond Road on Staten Island.

Williams, despite protesting his innocence, was dismissed from Wagner’s baseball team. He sank into what he describes as self-destructive episodes of drinking and moved off campus. He insisted he had been falsely arrested — the original 911 call concerning the bar fight spoke of three white men as the culprits — and the charge was later dropped. He then sued the officer and the city, ultimately agreeing to a modest cash settlement. Neither the officer nor the city admitted wrongdoing.

Williams never played again for Wagner. After graduation, he spent a year attending major league



tryouts. He ended up being drafted No. 1 over all to play in the upstart independent South Coast League, but the league folded after one season. He spent another year playing for an independent league team in Laredo, Tex., before giving up the game.

“I’m not saying that I could have been in the major leagues,” Williams said. “I might have. Who knows? But I definitely feel like if that situation would have never happened, then I would have had a better opportunity, a better shot.”

Williams now lives in Washington with his wife and son and teaches special education in an elementary school. Daragjati, and the baseball career that might have been, were part of Williams’s past.

Until recently.

On Oct. 17, six years after Williams was arrested, federal prosecutors in Brooklyn brought criminal charges against Daragjati, 32, for violating the civil rights of a black man he is suspected of falsely arresting in April. In a telephone call that government investigators say they intercepted the day after the arrest, Daragjati was recorded telling a friend that he had “fried” another black man.

According to the criminal complaint, the government intercepted calls in which Daragjati used a racial epithet for African-Americans on at least 12 other occasions. In one of the intercepted calls, Daragjati allegedly spoke of how tornadoes were not so bad because they tended to “vacuum” up black people. In another, he seemed to evince a cockiness, saying, “I’ve been skating it for a long time.”

Daragjati has pleaded not guilty to those federal charges, as well as others, including fraud, extortion and assault, from unrelated incidents that the authorities say occurred this year. His lawyer, Eric Franz, noted that the officer had not been charged in connection with his 2005 arrest of Williams. Daragjati’s disputed arrest of Williams was first reported by The Daily News.

Williams, after absorbing the news of the officer’s arrest, said, “I just feel really violated and really upset that he was able to get away.”

Baseball had always been a part of Williams’s life. His parents, Michael and Ivana, met at a co-ed softball game in Washington. Michael led off for the team, and Ivana batted last. Michael said that sometimes when Ivana was on base and he got an extra-base hit, he showed off his speed by running her down on the basepath. Thirty years later, the two live just a mile from the same softball field.

Michael and Ivana raised Jared and his younger brother, Joseph, in North Michigan Park in Washington. Jared excelled at basketball and football, but he fell in love with baseball early on by watching his father play in adult leagues. Williams received a few college scholarship offers as a three-sport athlete at DeMatha Catholic High School, including one from Maryland.

He wound up accepting a football scholarship at Wagner in 2002 because he was also asked to join the baseball team as a walk-on.

The baseball program at Wagner had been undistinguished for most of its first eight decades, but the class of 2006 — Williams’s class — came to shine. The team’s standout player, Andrew Bailey, now an All-Star closer for the Oakland Athletics, led a group of seven seniors who “basically put us on the map,” Litterio, the coach, said.

“Jared had a lot of talent,” Litterio said. “A quick, strong kid.”

Williams was early in his senior year when, on the night of Oct. 6, 2005, he was writing a research paper in his dormitory room, looking forward to celebrating his 21st birthday that Friday.

Williams recalled receiving a phone call from his roommate, Mario Wilcox, who asked Williams to pick him up at a bar at 2120 Richmond Road. Wilcox said the bar was being closed because a fight had broken out. Williams drove to the bar, where Wilcox and two other friends, Jamal Webb and Anthony Perilli, got into Williams's Jeep Cherokee to head back to campus. Williams halted at a stop sign a block from the bar. Daragjati and another police officer approached the Jeep.

Daragjati ordered Williams and his friends to get out. As Williams remembers the night, Daragjati bent him over the hood of the vehicle and handcuffed him without reading him his rights. Wilcox and Webb were also arrested and charged with the assault at the bar. Perilli, the only nonblack in Williams's group, was not arrested.

Williams was quickly kicked off the team for the fall exhibition season.

"When I got arrested, I don't know how, but the whole school found out about it instantly," Williams said. "I remember feeling humiliated walking around campus."

He added, "I wasn't from the New York area, so I was like, 'Well, maybe this is just how things are out here.'"

Litterio does not dispute that Wagner acted quickly.

"I don't remember if the school kicked him out or if I kicked him out," he said.

No other official at Wagner contacted in recent days would comment on Williams's career or record at the college, citing privacy laws.

"I don't think they wanted to be involved at all," Michael Williams said of the college officials. "And I think they presumed his guilt."

He recalls attending a Wagner game with his son as a spectator shortly after the arrest. Jared arrived decked out in Wagner baseball gear. Michael remembers Jared's pained look when the players and the coaches ignored him in the stands.

The deterioration of his relationship with the baseball team was the beginning of a personal descent.

Williams began to drink heavily with, he said, "the wrong crowd." He stopped caring about schoolwork. He avoided calling home. He became hostile toward those closest to him.

"He was no longer the innocent Jared," his father said.

Williams's behavior cost him any chance at a return to the team. As his former senior teammates finished their college careers by leaving their stamp on Wagner's athletic history, Williams spent the majority of his final months brooding in a single-bedroom apartment 20 minutes from campus.

"I isolated myself from everybody else," Williams said.

But Williams did rally to spend his senior year fighting the charges. A Wagner football player who witnessed the arrest later told Williams that Daragjati had approached him and asked, "Where the black guys at?"

At a court hearing in 2006, Williams's lawyer, Duane C. Felton, presented the transcript of the initial 911 call from the bar in which the assailants were described as white males. The victim did not appear to testify at Williams's hearing.

Williams recalled Daragjati's testifying under questioning by the judge that he read Williams his rights on the night of the arrest.

"I just remember looking over at my roommate and saying, 'Did he really just tell that lie, after taking the oath?'" Williams said, "That's when I knew that it was personal. This guy has a different motivation."

Eleven months after Williams was arrested, and five months after he graduated from Wagner, the Criminal Court of Richmond County dismissed all the charges against Williams for lack of probable cause.

In November 2006, Williams sued the City of New York and Daragjati for making a false arrest and violating his civil rights. A year later, the city paid Williams \$12,500 to settle his lawsuit.

“Jared was reluctant to settle for that amount,” Felton said. “He basically lost some opportunities for getting scouted.”

Today, in Washington, Williams is working with young players who, long shots perhaps, may one day be scouted. He heads the team at Archbishop Carroll High School, coaches for the D.C. Dynasty travel team and gives personal lessons.

“That particular moment in my life definitely made a huge impact,” Williams said of his arrest. “It made me reflect about how cruel this world can be to you. About how real it is as well.”

He thinks back occasionally to that minor league park in Lakewood, a professional, if modest stadium, a two-home-run afternoon.

“The grass is so soft, the dirt is so perfect,” Williams said. “I remember thinking one day I’m going to be playing in a park like this or bigger.”