

Unlicensed Attorney May Face Jail

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A former associate at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in Palo Alto was arrested late last month in connection with allegations that he was not licensed to practice law and had attempted to falsify credentials.

Steven Young Lee, 31, who had worked in the prestigious law firm's securities litigation division since last August, was fired last month when the firm found out that the Boston College law graduate had lied about being licensed to practice law in California or anywhere else.

Lee's attorney, Lucy McAllister, did not return phone calls, and when reached Monday, Lee himself said "I don't want to comment."

After his arrest April 29, Lee was charged with felony grand theft and the unlawful practice of law. If convicted of both charges, Lee faces up to five years behind bars, according to Santa Clara County Assistant District Attorney Al Weger.

While at Wilson, Sonsini, Lee conducted interviews, took depositions, gave legal advice and made court appearance in L.A., San Francisco and San Mateo. The firm has returned to clients a total of \$219,865.95 that was billed for Lee's work, and it brought the matter to prosecutors' attention, Weger said.

"The work he did seemed adequate," said Wilson, Sonsini lawyer Timothy Scott, chair of the firm's litigation department. "The other lawyers seemed to have liked him."

According to a report by District Attorney Investigator Gary Medlin, the allegations unfolded April 13 when partner Leo Cunningham overheard his secretary talking to someone from the State Bar, which grants individuals licenses to practice the profession. The secretary, according to the report, was doing a routine verification to make sure Lee was in good standing with the bar. (To practice law in California, an individual must pass a bar exam and an ethics review.)

The bar, however, told the secretary that the number she provided did not belong to Lee. Cunningham then confronted the associate, according to the report, and Lee said that he must have incorrectly written the number down. He said he would check his bar card and give the correct number to Cunningham, the report said.

Lee later provided Cunningham with another number, which state bar records showed was registered to a Steve Y.C. Lee who lived in Sacramento. Steven Y. Lee finally admitted he was not licensed in any state, the report said. He was immediately suspended, and on that day sent a change of address form to the California State bar, requesting a duplicate bar card belonging to Steve Y.C. Lee, listing Wilson as his new employer. Less than a week after he was fired, Lee submitted a resume to an executive legal search firm to find new work as a lawyer, the report said.

"This was an obvious attempt on his part to steal Steve Y.C. Lee's bar number," concluded the report. The Sacramento lawyer, meanwhile, said this week that he is considering a negligence suit against Wilson, Sonsini. "At the bare minimum, Wilson was negligent," said Steve Y.C. Lee. "All it takes is one search. ... What firm doesn't do a background check?"

Scott defended the firm's hiring practices, even as he stressed that such an incident would never happen again.

"We check references, and we did so in this case," he said. The state bar's Web site, which lists Steve Y.C. Lee's bar number and that of other lawyers, is accessible to anyone.

Ironically, Steven Y. Lee had gotten over what to most aspiring lawyers are the hardest parts of the process -- getting through law school and passing a required test. Prosecutors said he has passed the bar in at least two states, and in 1993, he graduated from Boston College Law School.

Shortly afterward, though, Lee made what would prove to be a terrible mistake. It wasn't that he failed the Massachusetts exam (more than half of test-takers do), but that he lied about the results to land a job with a firm in that state, prosecutors said. When the firm found out, it fired Lee.

In 1994, Lee moved to New York and took the bar exam for that state. He passed, but because of the incident in Massachusetts, he was rejected in a review of ethical conduct -- a step almost perfunctory to many lawyers. After that, said prosecutors, he told the law firm of Dickstein, Shapiro, Morin & Oshinsky that he was indeed licensed -- and worked there until his lie was discovered 15 months later, prosecutors said.

In 1997, Lee moved to work at Brian Cave LLP in Los Angeles. He lasted there less than two weeks when the firm found out he didn't have a license to practice in California, prosecutors said. Last February, Lee passed the California bar exam. But, said the report, "He never followed through with the procedures necessary to become licensed."