

# SILICON VALLEY TROPHY WIFE DIVORCE-QUEEN SEEKS VP GIG, SEX AND DRUGS

When [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) was considering potential running mates for his presidential run, his [shortlist was initially topped](#) by two well-known men with unusual résumés: Aaron Rodgers, the N.F.L. quarterback and frequent [purveyor of conspiracy theories](#), and Jesse Ventura, the former governor of Minnesota and professional wrestler known as “The Body.”

Instead, Mr. Kennedy made a surprise pick — a woman and a little-known figure with an unusual background: [Nicole Shanahan](#).

Ms. Shanahan, 38, a onetime Silicon Valley lawyer, has never held public office and has scant name recognition. But she was selected after Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Ventura fell through as vice-presidential candidates and Mr. Kennedy’s campaign needed money to fund its efforts to get onto state ballots, three people familiar with the events said. And money was something that Ms. Shanahan could provide in abundance.

Ms. Shanahan has a fortune of more than \$1 billion that stems largely from her divorce settlement last year with [Sergey Brin](#), a founder of Google, whose net worth exceeds [\\$145 billion](#), three people with knowledge of her finances said. During their five-year marriage, Ms. Shanahan partied with Silicon Valley’s elite and used recreational drugs including cocaine, ketamine and psychedelic mushrooms, according to eight people and documents reviewed by The New York Times. Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Brin separated after she had a sexual encounter with Elon Musk in 2021, three of the people said.

The incidents were part of a rarefied — and sometimes turbulent — life that Ms. Shanahan led in the nation’s tech capital before her turn to politics, according to interviews with more than 20 people who know her or were briefed on her actions, as well as property records, court documents, tax records, emails and other messages reviewed by The Times. Many of the details of her life, including those of her divorce settlement, have not been reported.

“Status is very important to Nicole, and the amount of money you have,” said Daniel Morris, a photographer based in Puerto Rico who was friends with Ms. Shanahan and her first husband, Jeremy Kranz, a technology investor.

On the campaign trail, Ms. Shanahan has depicted herself as a hardworking former entrepreneur and lawyer, a success story who once needed food stamps and a unifier who can heal a divided America. But she has omitted and embellished parts of her history, including aspects of her relationship with Mr. Brin, to make herself appear more relatable, according to the people who know her and documents reviewed by The Times.

In a February interview with The Times, Ms. Shanahan described herself as a onetime “Silicon Valley princess.” In response to questions for this article, she texted: “I’m shocked the NYT is letting you run something like this.” The Kennedy campaign didn’t respond to requests for comment. Ms. Shanahan has publicly denied having an affair with Mr. Musk.

Mr. Musk, his lawyer and a spokeswoman for Mr. Brin did not return requests for comment.

Mr. Kennedy, who is running as an independent, picked Ms. Shanahan without his advisers having looked fully into her history or where her money was coming from, two people familiar with the campaign said. By then, she had already become a crucial financier of his run.

Ms. Shanahan, who has said she is a vaccine skeptic like Mr. Kennedy, funded a Super Bowl ad for Mr. Kennedy this year through a \$4 million donation to a super PAC, American Values 2024. In March, she infused Mr. Kennedy’s campaign with an additional \$2 million. Last week, she said she had given [an additional \\$8 million](#).

Their ticket has secured a place on the presidential ballot in Michigan, a swing state, as well as in five other states. Mr. Kennedy has enough signatures to reach the ballot in seven additional states, his campaign has said, potentially putting him and Ms. Shanahan in a position to tip the November election.

Ms. Shanahan is “exactly the right person,” Mr. Kennedy said when he announced her as his running mate in March. He called her a “fierce warrior mom” who “overcame every daunting obstacle and went on to achieve the highest levels of the American dream.”

## **A Yoga Festival**

On the campaign trail, Ms. Shanahan, who grew up in Oakland, Calif., has said she knew what it was like to be “one misfortune away from disaster.”

Her father, Shawn Shanahan, couldn't hold down a job, was diagnosed with bipolar schizophrenia when she was 9 years old and died in 2014, she has said. Her family struggled, Ms. Shanahan has said, needing food stamps and government assistance.

Ms. Shanahan obtained an athletic scholarship to attend Saint Mary's College High School, a private Catholic school in Berkeley, Calif., according to the Kennedy campaign website. The school, which charges about \$24,000 a year for tuition, confirmed that Ms. Shanahan had been a student but said it had never offered scholarships. Ms. Shanahan received some tuition assistance, the school said, but it declined to say how much.

Ms. Shanahan graduated from the University of Puget Sound in 2007, working at a Seattle law firm around the same time. She later worked at RPX, a patent firm, and in 2013, she founded ClearAccess IP, a patent tech company, according to her LinkedIn profile. She completed a law degree at the Santa Clara University School of Law in 2014.

Adam Philipp, the founder and managing partner of Aeon Law, the Seattle law firm where Ms. Shanahan worked, said he was impressed when she applied to be a paralegal in 2006. "She had a willingness to learn and an abundance of common sense," he said.

In 2011, Ms. Shanahan began dating Mr. Kranz, a tech investor in San Francisco. She told people that she had converted to Judaism during that time for the relationship. Mr. Kranz bought a \$2.7 million penthouse with views of San Francisco about a month before their wedding in August 2014, according to property records.

That July, Ms. Shanahan met Mr. Brin at a yoga festival in Lake Tahoe, Calif., four people with knowledge of the events said. He had recently separated from Anne Wojcicki, his wife at the time. Mr. Brin and Ms. Shanahan embarked on an affair weeks before her wedding to Mr. Kranz, the people said.

Mr. Kranz discovered the relationship several days after he married Ms. Shanahan when he saw texts between her and Mr. Brin on her phone, they said. He filed to annul the marriage 27 days after the wedding, court records show.

Mr. Kranz planned to list fraud as a reason for the annulment, the people said. But Ms. Shanahan was concerned that a fraud claim would jeopardize her ability to practice law. While negotiating with Mr. Kranz about their split, she threatened to harm herself, three people said.

Instead of an annulment, Mr. Kranz agreed to a divorce without making a fraud claim. As part of their settlement, Ms. Shanahan was required to remove any evidence of Mr. Kranz from her social media accounts and pay him \$20,000 in partial wedding costs and

legal fees, court records show. Mr. Kranz did not respond to a request for comment.

In an [interview](#) with People magazine last year, Ms. Shanahan said she started dating Mr. Brin in 2015. She recounted wandering Stanford University's campus with the billionaire and discussing quantum physics.

"I was living in a fairy tale," she said. "It was magical."

## **Becoming a Philanthropist**

Mr. Brin became Ms. Shanahan's entryway to the tech industry's upper echelons. The couple traveled the world, took trips on Mr. Brin's yachts and stayed in the most elite camps at Burning Man, the countercultural annual festival in the Nevada desert.

They married in 2018 and had a daughter, Echo, that same year. They owned properties in Lake Tahoe; Los Altos, Calif.; Montana; and Malibu, Calif., where Ms. Shanahan now spends much of her time.

In 2019, Ms. Shanahan began building a foundation, Bia-Echo, named for her daughter, that focuses on criminal justice and fertility longevity. (Ms. Shanahan has said she struggled to become pregnant.) She used more than \$20 million from Mr. Brin for the effort, according to tax documents.

To raise her profile, Ms. Shanahan hired Matthew Hiltzik, a publicist who has worked with Katie Couric and other high-profile women. Her goal was to become a famous philanthropist like MacKenzie Scott, the former wife of the Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, four people familiar with Ms. Shanahan's plans said.

In 2020, Ms. Shanahan sold ClearAccess IP to IPwe, a patent technology firm, in exchange for IPwe stock that was valued at more than \$10 million, two people familiar with the deal said. IPwe filed for bankruptcy this year.

Around the time of the sale, Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Brin learned that Echo was autistic. Ms. Shanahan has said the diagnosis made her question the use of childhood vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says childhood vaccines are safe.

In 2021, she paid more than \$200,000 for a lifestyle photographer to take her photos for a [San Francisco Magazine article](#) called "Nicole Shanahan Is Fighting the Good Fight," according to documents viewed by The Times. Ms. Shanahan was photographed in the country with horses, talking about her goals of creating a healthy and livable planet.

In the article, Ms. Shanahan said she had been sexually assaulted by an unnamed male co-worker while working for RPX. The episode caused her to sink into a severe depression and ultimately give up law, she said.

Daniel McCurdy, the chief executive of RPX, said in a statement that the company hadn't been informed of the claim before the article was published, and that it had engaged a law firm to conduct an investigation. It was inconclusive, he said.

## **A Marriage Crumbles**

Mr. Brin and Ms. Shanahan found the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns challenging, three people close to the couple said. Among other things, they struggled with their daughter's autism diagnosis, the people said.

Ms. Shanahan began going out more without Mr. Brin, according to five people and documents viewed by The Times. At a party in early 2021 in Miami, Ms. Shanahan was so intoxicated by drugs and alcohol that she required an IV infusion, the documents show.

That fall, Ms. Shanahan threw a Studio 54-themed birthday party for herself at a New York club. Mr. Musk, a longtime friend of Mr. Brin's, attended. In December 2021, Ms. Shanahan saw Mr. Musk again at a private party in Miami that his brother, Kimbal Musk, was hosting in connection with the Art Basel festival.

At that party, Elon Musk and Ms. Shanahan took ketamine, a popular party drug that is legal with a prescription, and disappeared together for several hours, according to four people briefed on the event and documents related to it. Ms. Shanahan later told Mr. Brin that she had had sex with Mr. Musk, three of the people said. She also relayed the details to friends, family and advisers.

Mr. Brin and Ms. Shanahan separated about two weeks after the party, and he filed for divorce the next year, citing "irreconcilable differences," according to court documents.

In 2022, The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) Ms. Shanahan's encounter with Mr. Musk. Mr. Musk and Ms. Shanahan have denied an affair.

In her interview with People last year, Ms. Shanahan said she and Mr. Musk had been talking about her daughter's autism treatment that night. She also said it was humiliating to be known for a sexual act and called a cheater.

Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Brin took nearly 18 months to reach a divorce settlement, according to court records. During that time, she threatened to harm herself, two

people briefed on the matter said. Their divorce became final last year.

## Into Politics

For years, Ms. Shanahan donated to Democrats, according to donor filings. In 2020, she gave \$25,000 to a political action committee backing President Biden. Then last year, she gave \$6,600 to Mr. Kennedy — the maximum allowed for an individual contributor — when he was running as a Democrat for the presidential nomination.

In her February interview with The Times, Ms. Shanahan said she had initially been disappointed when Mr. Kennedy announced that he would run as an independent. But she began to pour money into his campaign, including the Super Bowl ad, which showed images of Mr. Kennedy superimposed on those of the 1960 presidential campaign of his uncle John F. Kennedy. At the time, Ms. Shanahan had spoken to Mr. Kennedy once and had never met him, she said.

In March, Ms. Shanahan and her new partner, Jacob Strumwasser, met Mr. Kennedy and his wife, Cheryl Hines, for dinner. During the meal, Mr. Strumwasser, who has worked in the crypto industry, suggested Ms. Shanahan for the vice president's job, she said in a podcast this month with Sage Steele, a former ESPN anchor. Mr. Kennedy liked Ms. Shanahan's story, people familiar with the campaign said.

In recent weeks, Ms. Shanahan has largely scrubbed her social media feeds, two people familiar with her and the Kennedy campaign said. Her social accounts are now populated with shots of herself without makeup at a farmers' market as well as wearing Western gear and posing with rifles in Texas with Mr. Strumwasser. In the past, her feeds showed her dressed up for high-end events and posing for selfies.

Ms. Shanahan began attending campaign events with Mr. Kennedy this month. At a fund-raiser in Nashville last week, she announced that she had given another \$8 million to the campaign and said, "I think I know what they're going to say — they're going to say Bobby only picked me for my money."

Her remark drew laughter from the crowd.

The post [‘Silicon Valley Princess’: Inside the Life of Nicole Shanahan, R.F.K. Jr.’s Running Mate](#) appeared first on [New York Times](#).

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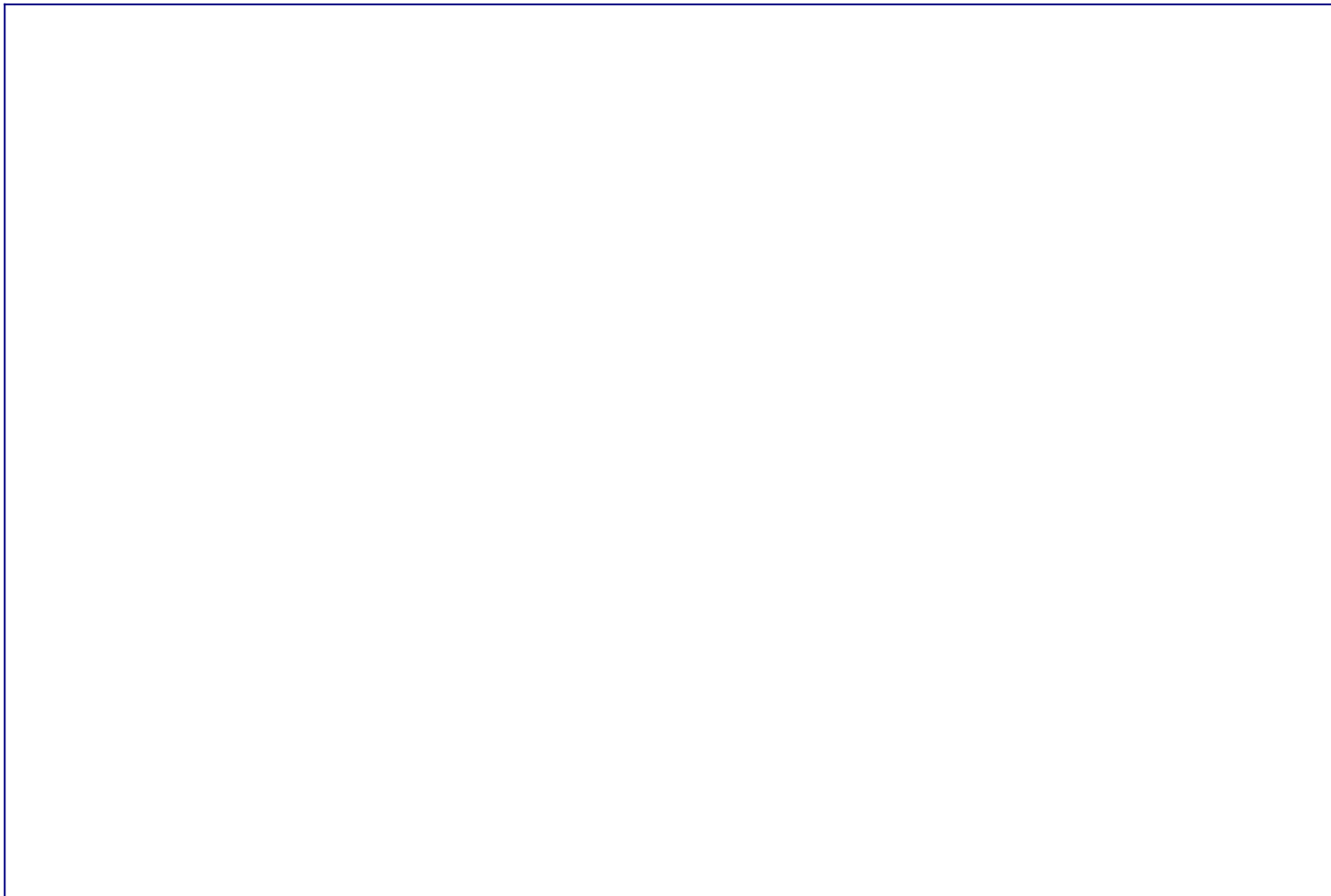
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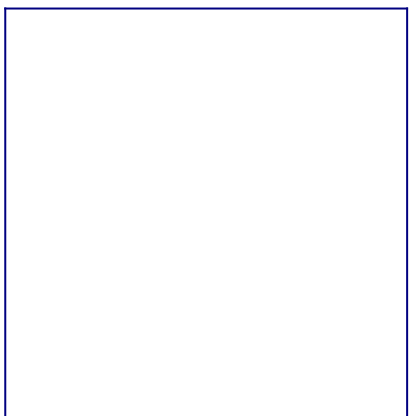
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