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Recent off-campus crimes test TU Alert system

December 18, 2010 by [Angelo Fichera and Ashley Nguyen](#)

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Armed robberies that have occurred close to campus during the past month have students and administrators concerned about when to release more information.

While many students spent the weekend before the holiday break stressing over a daunting finals week, others were forced by gunpoint to lie on their living room floor.

On Friday, Dec. 10, a home occupied by six students on the 1700 block of North Gratz Street was robbed. The students, Rebecca Harding, a junior business major, Sartaj Phanda, a junior film major, Chad Dunkelberger, a sophomore economics major and Ben Reese, a junior communications major, along with another two students who were not present during the robbery, have been living in their rented house since August.

Reese said he was entering his house shortly after midnight on an early Friday morning, when a stranger told him to “be quiet.”

“He had a gun pointed at me, said be quiet, and then he walked up the steps and put it up against my stomach and said, “Take me into your house quietly,”” said Reese.

Reese said he opened the door and the two unmasked, armed African-American males entered his house as they told him to lay down on the floor, and began to gather the other roommates.

Phanda said he and his friend, Mike, were walking down the stairs when he saw one of the armed men point a silver handgun at him. The man told him to come down and lay face-first on the floor.

The men then entered Dunkelberger’s room on the second floor, and Harding’s room on the third floor. They made them each go to the first floor with their fellow housemates, the students said.

The four roommates and Phanda’s friend, who is also a student, were forced to lie facedown on the ground level floor while two unmasked, ungloved robbers proceeded to steal their possessions.

“They did keep saying they didn’t want to hurt us, as long as we didn’t move they weren’t going to hurt us,” Reese said. “We told them ‘Take anything you want, just don’t hurt us.’”

“He said, ‘We’re robbing you because it’s Christmas time,’” Phanda said.

The men took a roommate’s bag to carry the possessions, Phanda said, and after about 25 minutes, left the house. Harding said that once the men left she set off the panic system on the home’s alarm system as Phanda went to a neighbor’s house to call 911. Undercover cops wearing Temple sweatshirts were there almost immediately, the roommates said.

After the incident, the students went to Central Detectives and, after calling their respective families at the TECH Center, went to Campus Safety Services.

“We asked them point blank whether or not they were going to send [a TU Alert or TU Advisory] out,” Phanda said. “And they were like ‘Well we’re going to wait and see what we can get and then we’re going to send one out.’”

The university released a TU Advisory at around 12:41 p.m. on Friday, approximately 12 hours after the incident occurred.

“That was like my main concern after it happened,” Harding said. “I wanted someone to tell me that things were going to be safe for the rest of the students. I didn’t want to anyone go through what we went through.”

ALERTING FACTORS

The decision to send out either a [TU Alert or TU Advisory](#) ultimately lies in the hands of President Ann Weaver Hart, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer Anthony Wagner and Campus Safety Services Director Carl Bittenbender.

TU Advisories, which are used to communicate information about a significant incident that doesn't warrant immediate action, and TU Alerts, which are used to communicate information regarding an incident that is an emergency and requires immediate action, may seem increasingly common this year after Hart amended the TU Alert System in September.

"It really put into the policy those situations where we're not required to communicate, but we think that it's advisable," Wagner said. "We think that it would be helpful to students to promote campus safety if we do some kind of communication even though the Cleary Law and our policy doesn't require us to."

On Monday, Dec. 13, three cases in which students were robbed at gunpoint occurred on streets surrounding Main Campus between 12:30 p.m. and 1:15 p.m. A TU Alert informing students about increased police activity following the incidents was issued at 3:23 p.m.

The approximately 30 percent of students who have signed up for the mirror-three advisory system – which includes a text message, phone call and e-mail message – received the message in all three forms of communication. Students can sign up through [OwlNet](#).

As he was entering Wagner's offices in Sullivan Hall Monday afternoon for a meeting, Bittenbender received word of two close-to-campus armed robberies at 13th and Dauphin streets and 15th and Norris Streets. As police officers gathered information about the incidents, a final report came in: Approximately a half hour before the first report, another student had been robbed at 15th and Dauphin streets.

"We saw that there were three similar descriptions, and we realized they might do a fourth," Bittenbender said.

"We were worried that we had criminals that were working the neighborhood, and they were doing point-of-gun armed robberies," Wagner said. "I was on the phone with the president, and she said go with the mirror-three. We did the whole thing through [Assistant Vice President of Financial Administration] Katie D'Angelo's Blackberry."

Nine minutes after the decision was made to send out a message via the mirror-three system, all students signed up received a text message. Wagner acknowledged that there is a small lag time between initiating an e-mail message and when the student receives it.

"It's important for everyone to know that there is a process," Wagner said. "There's a lot of discretion and a lot of judgment that has to go into it, but the one thing that I'm very satisfied with is that campus safety always comes first. No other thought process goes into that. We're not worried about public relations; we're not worried about reputation; it's safety."

OPEN CASE

Shortly after 7:30 p.m. on Nov. 21, Conor Broderick and his roommate heard a knock on the door of their home on the 2100 block of North Carlisle Street.

Broderick, a junior broadcast, telecommunications and mass media major, cracked the door slightly only to be pushed back into the living room with a gun pointed in his face. Two African-American males in their early- to mid-twenties entered the house, told Broderick and his roommate to get on the ground and went upstairs.

"They got [two of] our other roommates, went through our pockets, took our laptops and told us if we called the cops, they'd kill us," Broderick said. "Then they ran out the door."

Broderick and his roommates called the police, who arrived shortly after the incident was reported at 7:38 p.m. No suspects were apprehended, and the case is still open.

No TU Alert or TU Advisory was sent out.

"There are specifics with that incident that night that are confidential to the investigation that came into the weight of our determining factor," Bittenbender said. "We did not feel there was any additional threat that was going to be continuing in any fashion."

Determining whether or not there is an ongoing threat, along with campus safety, is a large decision-making factor when deciding to send out an alert to students, Bittenbender said.

"It's a discussion across the entire country, especially after Virginia Tech," Bittenbender said. "What is an ongoing threat? We have to look at past incidents, patterns and different nuisances. Is it targeted to a specific individual? You have to do your best with the best information you have."

"There is a weighing factor," he added. "One of the students from that house" was disappointed that there was a TU Alert sent out for other incidents but not his. But [students] need to rest assure that we are thinking about keeping students safe constantly. Sometimes the students have to put their faith in people."

Bittenbender, who is entering his 41st year in the police force, said he thinks of preserving students' safety no differently than when his

daughter, who graduated in 2007, attended Temple.

With respect to the seven-year average, Bittenbender and Wagner said the number of robberies is below average. However, the number of robberies this year is slightly up from last year.

“If you have the last three years, last year was a little bit of a down year, and this year we’ve picked up a little bit more,” Bittenbender said. “But last year was an exceptionally good year below some of the prior years.”

Though Bittenbender said crime in the 22nd District – where Temple is located – is slightly up in the areas where some student-related incidents have occurred this year, he said he thinks some of it has to do with the economy.

Since Dec. 1, there have been 13 robberies by handgun in streets surrounding Main Campus, according to the Philadelphia Police Department crime statistics, as of Thursday, Dec. 16.

NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS

The housemates who were robbed Dec. 10 said that, prior to these incidents, they felt safe in the neighborhood and said they were careful when it came to safety.

“We always took the necessary precautions,” Harding said.

Although the landlord has changed the locks on the doors, the students said they’re currently looking for ways to get out of the lease.

“I’m not living here next semester,” Reese said. “I’m living probably in Center City or somewhere there. I don’t want to live in North Philly. The only place I’d live at is right across from the police station. If not, I’d rather pay a little bit extra to live in a somewhat safer area.”

Likewise, Broderick said he is still unnerved by the robbery on North Carlisle Street.

“I was completely comfortable before,” said Broderick, whose house on Gratz Street and Oxford Avenue was robbed last year while no one was home. “Now I’m scared to walk out of my house, and I live right on Carlisle. I’m still freaked out.”

Bittenbender said he continually encourages parents and students to closely evaluate where they choose to live.

“I always tell parents, ‘Would you move into a property without checking it out?’” Bittenbender said. “I spoke to a parent yesterday whose daughter informed her of the messages we just sent out and she said, ‘My daughter next semester is moving here.’ I asked if she had visited the property, and she said, ‘No, I have not.’”

“There’s a shared responsibility,” Bittenbender added.

CONCERNING COMMUNICATION

With an increasing student population and advancing technologies, Wagner said the decision to release an alert must be discretionary.

“It’s really a balance between not wanting to over-communicate,” Wagner said. “If you’re following the blogs, there are students who are blogging, ‘Quit blowing up my phone.’”

However, Broderick said he would like to have more details when crimes happen on or around Main Campus.

“They just say, there was a robbery on such and such street,” Broderick said. “But I want to know what happened. What should I be looking out for? The most recent one [on Dec. 13] with the descriptions was the most informative one.”

Still, postings on social media sites such as [the Facebook page](#), “[Eyes Around Temple](#),” have Wagner and other administrators concerned their messages are decreasingly noticed by students.

“If we put too many of these [alerts] out, and we’re already seeing this because we’re monitoring the social media sites very carefully, we realize that we’re beginning to have students tune us out,” Wagner said. “That’s a real big concern because if we have one of those situations where there really is a very real ongoing threat, we don’t want people to tune us out.”

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[Full Disclosure: Sartaj Phanda has worked for The Temple News.]



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