

Journal News

Estimated printed pages: 3

February 15, 2007

Section: OPINION

Edition: GWPR

Page: 6B

OFF-CAMPUS SAFETY

STAFF

Communities, students can help raise awarenessThe ongoing trial of a Delaware man accused of killing Lindsey Bonistall of White Plains in her off-campus apartment almost two years ago and the off-campus shooting early Sunday in New Rochelle of an Iona College student send shudders through parents, college officials and students. Personal safety of college students is always a concern, of course, and most colleges in recent years have ramped up measures to enhance it on-campus. Off-campus living is another challenge.College students tend to live more casually, keep unorthodox hours and live in older, multi-dwelling housing, where there tends to be more transience. Basic security changes, such as having locks replaced for, or by, new tenants, can fall by the wayside. After the shooting of the 20-year-old Iona College student Sunday near another New Rochelle school, Monroe College, some of the young adults interviewed by The Journal News didn't sound worried:Said a 20-year-old female student at Monroe: "I even go to CVS at 1, 2 in the morning. I feel safe."A 23-year-old male student, also at Monroe, said he heard the shots outside his building early Sunday but still had confidence in the neighborhood: "My building is pretty quiet. Nothing really happens in that building."Sorting out prioritiesIt's human nature, or at least wishful thinking, to believe it-can't-happen-here or it-can't happen-to-me, especially among young adults. College life is one defined by new freedoms, and personal security may not seem a priority. Lindsey Bonistall of White Plains, who was a sophomore at the University of Delaware, was raped and strangled in her off-campus apartment in suburban Newark, Del., in 2005. Jurors in the case Monday visited the neighborhood of College Park, where Bonistall, and the man accused of first-de-gree murder in her death, James Cooke Jr., lived a block apart. Bonistall's friends also began testifying this week.It's been almost eight years, but Rocklanders likely remember Robert Hayden of Chestnut Ridge, a student in Denver, who was stabbed to death during a botched robbery in his off-campus apartment in 1999. Hayden, a sophomore at Metropolitan State College, had moved to the apartment near the college just a few weeks earlier.Avoid being a targetBonistall's older sister, Kristen Bonistall, gave a lecture at the University of Delaware in May on the importance of creating safe, off-campus living options. The Bonistall family had established PEACE OUTside CAMPUS to honor her life and foster awareness about off-campus dangers. The acronym is "for prevention, education, advocacy, certified off-campus housing, empowerment, off-campus safety, university collaboration and trusted resource," said Kristen Bonistall, whose apartment was burglarized six months after her sister's death. "My own experiences," she said, "have shown me that living in a college town makes you a target."Police and on-campus security agencies in the Lower Hudson Valley echo the need for all college students to take common-sense steps particularly when they leave the relative security of their campuses or move to off-campus housing. Community leaders, too, should examine what they, through collaboration between residents, police, college officials and students, can do to prevent crime — beginning with public-awareness campaigns that beat the drum about personal safety and home security, and setting up neighborhood-watch initiatives that include the new college kids in town.

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