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Off Campus and Off the College Security Radar?

By KATE STONE LOMBARDI
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COLLEGE tours are pretty standard. A student walking backward will show you the library, the athletic center and a typical dorm room. Then there will be the requisite safety talk. The tour guide will point out blue boxes -- emergency call buttons for the campus police -- and extol the security systems in the residence halls. The spiel usually includes a bit about how, if a student feels uncomfortable walking alone at night on campus, he or she can simply call security for an escort.

This usually comforts anxious parents who are about to send their children away to college. But there is a security gap that often isn't apparent on those college tours. It is true that most universities work hard to keep their campuses safe. But it also true that many colleges do not have enough housing for their undergraduates. Many students live off campus, and the security of those residences is generally not the responsibility of the college. Lighting, locks, patrols and other safety measures are dependent on the landlord, and vary widely by place and neighborhood.

No one knows this better than the Bonistalls, a White Plains family that is sitting through the trial of James E. Cooke Jr., who is accused of murdering their daughter Lindsey. Lindsey M. Bonistall, who graduated in 2003 from Good Counsel Academy in White Plains, was a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Delaware when an attacker broke through a locked sliding door in her off-campus apartment. The police say that on May 1, 2005, Mr. Cooke raped and strangled Lindsey, then set fire to the apartment.

In opening arguments in Wilmington, Del., on Feb. 2, the defense urged the jury to find Mr. Cooke mentally ill.

Mark Bonistall, Lindsey's father, said the family did not want to talk about their daughter during the trial, preferring to keep a low profile until the ordeal is over. But last year, the Bonistalls established a foundation in Lindsey's name dedicated to keeping students who live off campus safe (rememberlindsey.com). They hope to work with landlords to improve apartment security and with colleges to improve transportation, patrols and safety awareness.

Locally, college administrators grapple with the issue of safety to varying degrees, depending on the percentage of students who live off campus. Sarah Lawrence College, on 41 wooded acres that border Bronxville and Yonkers, houses 87 percent of its 1,200 undergraduates on campus. Security in residence halls is tight. Most dormitories are kept locked day and night. Deliveries, like flowers, FedEx or food, must be made to a main desk, not individual rooms. Security officers patrol residence halls.

But what of the 13 percent of students who live off campus?

"If the housing is owned by someone else, the locks are the landlord or private owner's responsibility," said Micheal Rengers, vice president of operations for Sarah Lawrence. "There's very little that we can do with those residences other than educate the students on how to be safe."


At Purchase College, about 35 percent of students live off campus. Some commuting students live with their parents; others rent nearby. The college raises the issue of off-campus security in safety-awareness programs in a student's first year. "We have a freshman seminar, and whether you're a commuter or a residential student, we cover sexual assault prevention, talk about drinking and drugs and other things to keep them safe," said Lynn Mahoney, vice president for student affairs. Students are encouraged to walk in groups, and the commuter parking lot is well lighted,

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she said.

At Pace University's campus in Pleasantville, about 2,600 of the 3,700 students are commuters, and administrators do not know how many of them live with their parents and how many live by themselves. Darnita Killian, vice president for student affairs, said that the school tried to be helpful to students looking for off-campus housing but that it did not make recommendations about its quality or safety.

"That's pretty much beyond what almost any school can do," Dr. Killian said. "If you think about the amount of personnel it would actually take for someone to go and physically inspect each place, do a security analysis and audit, check whether the porch steps are going to fall in, and be able to say this place is safe for you to live in, and put your school name on it, that's simply a cost that is going to get passed back to the student."

It would also, of course, be a huge liability risk to the college. Off-campus safety is not simple. Universities may have little control over privately owned property, but they do have some responsibility for their students.

One thing is clear, though. Schools, parents and students all need to be more aware of this issue. Lindsey Bonistall was an all-American cheerleader, a varsity swimmer, an honor roll student, a community volunteer and an aspiring journalist. She liked to sign off her conversations with, "Peace Out."

The end of her life was far from peaceful. Which is why her legacy is so important.

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