

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Father of slain student leads security campaign

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For many university students, moving off-campus can be an exciting, yet uninformed decision. Little to no resources are provided by the university to help students choose their housing wisely.

Mark Bonistall, whose daughter Lindsey was found dead in her Towne Court apartment May 1, plans to change this problem.

"Students are moving off-campus," Bonistall said. "We want to give them and their parents every opportunity to know where they're moving to, that it is safe, secure and environmentally correct."

The Lindsey M. Bonistall foundation, PEACE OUTside Campus, was initiated by Mark Bonistall to strengthen off-campus security.

"The name is kind of corny," he said, "but from the time Lindsey was a tiny toddler she always did the peace sign and so we thought it would be in her interest to incorporate that."

PEACE OUTside Campus will require off-campus landlords to update security requirements to be listed as a certified property, Bonistall said. Safety features include auto-locking entryway doors, double locking unit doors, door peepholes and locking bars for sliding glass doors.

"One thing I learned about sliding glass doors is that it takes approximately 10 seconds to break open that door," Bonistall said. "I had no idea."

Bonistall will work closely with the university and the city to enforce the program and has received tremendous support from the community. He has met with landlords of off-campus apartments, the Newark Town and Gown Committee and university officials.

Cynthia Cummings, associate vice president for campus life, said once PEACE OUTside Campus is finalized, the university will publicize the program. Certified off-campus housing will be listed on the university Web site, so students can make an informed decision before they move off campus.

"Anytime you can improve security measures, you've improved the community," Cummings said. "Not only will this benefit students, but residents who rent apartments will be happier and more likely to stay."

Ryan Baker, regional portfolio manager for the Schwab Group which represents Towne Court and Park Place apartments, stated in an e-mail message that Bonistall's program will raise community and student partnerships.

"The Schwab Group plans on actively participating in Mr. Bonistall's program to not only meet but to exceed and assist Mr. Bonistall's program," he said.

Baker said the Schwab Group made substantial improvements in Towne Court following Lindsey's murder, including new windows and sliding glass doors that meet city requirements.

"Installation of chain locks in addition to deadbolt locks, additional management staff has been moved on site, interior and exterior lighting has been upgraded and police patrols have been increased," he said.

Baker said he would like to see these safety measures disperse across the country and would especially like to see student involvement.

Bonistall also stressed the importance of student participation in the program.

"Students should demand for better security," he said. "Just because they've moved out of the dorms and don't have the rules of the university, they still have the rules of society."

Junior Erica Santowski, a resident of Park Place apartments, said many safety measures can be taken to improve off-campus security.

"We don't have a lock on our main door, so anyone can get in," she said. "Once I saw this guy just sitting in the hallway of our apartment and I didn't even know if he lived there.

"It's especially unsafe at night," she said, "because then I have to walk through the complex by myself in the dark."

Bonistall said he hopes to see changes take place by the holidays.

Mayor Vance A. Funk III said the city has pledged to support the program and will require all new apartment buildings to increase security measures now.

Bonistall said PEACE OUTside Campus will be accepting private donations through its Web site, www.rememberlindsey.com.

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