

Autopsy: Blow to neck killed Rowan student

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INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

Rowan University sophomore Donald Farrell was killed by a blow to the neck, according to an autopsy completed today.

"This was either a blow from a fist or a foot that ruptured an artery," said Bernie Weisenfeld, spokesman for the Gloucester County Prosecutor's office.

The attack on Farrell happened so quickly, so spontaneously, authorities said, that there was little anyone could do to save him.

Five friends - four women and a man - were walking with Farrell when he was beaten, but they couldn't react in time.

One called 911. Police arrived within 90 seconds, followed shortly by an ambulance, but the attackers escaped and Farrell died hours later from head trauma.

"It was an extremely swift attack. It was unprovoked," Gloucester County Prosecutor Sean Dalton said Monday. "It ended before anyone could provide assistance."

The fatal beating of a Rowan University sophomore, on the edge of a campus packed with people on a homecoming weekend, has rattled and angered many at this small, suburban college.

Dalton said he hoped to reassure that community with quick arrests of the assailants.

"Anytime you have an unprovoked attack of this nature on a college campus, you need to act quickly," the prosecutor said.

He said police have identified a "person of interest" who was caught on a surveillance video making a purchase at the XPress Mart, a convenience store on Route 322, Rowan's main drag.

After leaving the store, investigators believe, that man and four others confronted Farrell and his friends, who were walking toward the XPress Mart from the nearby Beau Rivage Apartments, where Farrell lived.

Dalton said they asked Farrell, "Where's the parties?" Dalton called that "a typical conversation" that wouldn't raise alarms with any college student.

One or two of the men then attacked Farrell, Dalton said, punching him and kicking him once in the stomach. They then took his wallet and cell phone. Farrell, from Boonton Township, in Morris County, died at 1:47 a.m. Sunday.

Dalton said the attack appeared unrelated to gangs or race. He also said investigators have not ruled out the possibility that the assailants were students.

"This attack was motivated by financial means," he said. "It was a robbery, plain and simple."

The man in the surveillance video has been described as a thin, African-American male with long cornrows or dreadlocks - a description that sophomore finance major Jordan Johnson fits.

"I've already gotten like 20 looks just sitting here . . . I probably won't say anything controversial or go out to parties for a few weeks until they catch the perps," he said. "Robbing a college kid, it's just pointless. I have about three dollars on me. College kids are broke."

Although Johnson described Rowan as "pretty safe," other students said the attack on Farrell was not an aberration. Several described attacks carried out by non-students, and complained that campus security spends too much time busting up student parties.

In fact, the assault on Farrell was the fifth this fall and the second in eight days, said Timothy Michener, Rowan's director of public safety.

Several students said outsiders come to campus and cause trouble.

Jeff Durham, a 21-year-old student, said a group of men hassled him about a year ago at the XPress Mart. They demanded money, then started kicking his car.

"Literally there are groups of people walking around from the outside looking for fights," he said.

Carl Kent, 22, from Pleasantville, said he witnessed about a dozen people chase down a student last year and rob him of his cell phone. He said that was not unusual.

And, Lauren Cibelli, a junior from Paramus, said one of her friends was jumped and robbed last St. Patrick's Day, requiring 18 stitches to his head and lip.

"What happens is that the RoPo (Rowan Police) go out and stake out parties," said Krzysztof Rubin, a sophomore from Delran. "But stuff is happening right here on campus."

Rowan President Donald J. Farish held a campus meeting yesterday at the Esby Gym and sought to reassure students, saying that assaults on campus has dropped in each of the last three years - from 45 in 2004 to 21 in 2006.

"We all have the danger of overreacting to a tragic situation," he said.

Nonetheless, he said an "under-utilized" campus escort service would be expanded and campus security would increase its presence for the time being.

At an earlier news conference, Farish declared that "this is not the beginning of a crime wave."

"These are situations that happen so quickly that no amount of police presence could have prevented them," he said.

For years, Rowan University - formerly known as Glassboro State College - sat on more than 200 acres surrounded by lush Gloucester County farmland.

The area has changed drastically amid a development boom in South Jersey. Several major highways now connect the campus with the region, providing easy access to outsiders.

With the infusion of \$100 million from a benefactor in 1992 and a name change and university status, Rowan began polishing its image and academic reputation.

U.S. News & World Report has ranked Rowan among the "Top Tier" of northern regional universities for several years. Nearly 3,000 students, about one-third of Rowan's enrollment, live on campus in residence halls and apartment complexes.

In his meetings with students, Farish acknowledged that non-students create many problems on campus.

"We're trying to get away from the situation where parties are posted on Myspace and people not from campus are coming onto campus looking to do mischief," he said.

But, some students seemed unsatisfied with a campus security that they said was more interested in busting students for open containers of beer.

Some students also complained that the system that alerts students to crime on campus didn't send the message about the assault on Farrell until midnight - about three hours after the attack.

Farish was unapologetic about the "party patrol" and said the three-hour delay in putting out the word on the assault was not an issue.

"They had left the scene, they were not still on campus . . . it was not our highest priority," he said. "We wanted to find out more information."

Inquirer staff writers Alex Seise and Sam Wood contributed to this article.