

'Extremely swift attack' took Rowan student's life

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MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Law and justice student Jhessa Alcancara (left) questions Rowan University president Donald J. Farish. He told students an "under-utilized" campus escort service would be expanded and campus security would increase for the time being.

The attack on Donald 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 yesterday. "It ended before anyone could provide assistance."

The fatal beating of a Rowan University sophomore, within yards of a campus packed with people on a homecoming weekend, has rattled and angered many at this suburban state 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 had 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 about 9 p.m., 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.



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Students in a packed gym listen to Rowan University president Donald J. Farish. He told students that assaults on campus had dropped in each of the last three years - from 45 in 2004 to 21 in 2006. Still, students called for more security.

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 twice in the head and kicking him once in the stomach. They then took his wallet and cell phone. Farrell, from Boonton Township, in Morris County, died early 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 fits sophomore finance major Jordan Johnson.



The man in the red-and-white jacket, in an image captured at the XPress Mart, is a "person of interest" in the attack, said Dalton.

"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 nonstudents, and complained that campus security spent 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 came to campus and caused 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 Esbjornson Gym and sought to reassure students, saying assaults on campus had 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 amid Gloucester County farmland.

The area has changed drastically with a development boom in South Jersey. Several major highways now connect the campus with the region.

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.



DAVID SWANSON / Inquirer Staff
Gloucester County Prosecutor Sean Dalton, describing the fatal beating, said: "It was an extremely swift attack. It was unprovoked."

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."

For a video report on the fatal beating at Rowan University, visit <http://go.philly.com/rowanattack>

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