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# University community reflects on campus shooting



## GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

**Photo courtesy of Gardner-Webb University**

**By Jenna Shackelford**

As some time has passed, faculty, staff and students at Gardner-Webb have been able to reflect on the shooting that occurred on campus Sept. 27, and analyze what things were done well and what things need improvement in the case of another emergency situation.

Chelsea Sever, a resident advisor (RA) in Spangler, was sitting in her room when she first heard about the shooting from emergency texts and the graduate resident director (GRD). She asked what she should do, and was told to stay sheltered.

According to Sever, not much RA training is offered as preparation for an active shooter. "A lot of training that we go through is for incidents that are more normally occurring like drug and alcohol use, suicide watch and self-harm, or retention."

Police Chief Barry Johnson explained that RAs need to take shelter as much as other students do in the case of these emergencies, but praised their efforts in consoling students who were anxious because of the situation that occurred.

Sever was also concerned about the security of the buildings, since not every room on campus was checked. She explained that a person could easily travel from the apartments on campus to the other side of campus in just minutes, and the person could find ways into a building.

“Not everyone knew who [the police] were looking for, so if the guy was friends with someone in a dorm or a building, they could say, ‘Hey do you want to hang out here?’ and the [person-at-large] could say, ‘Oh, yeah,’ or the person-at-large could say, ‘I’m visiting, and I don’t have anywhere to be,’ and they could be let in,” she said.

Sever also noted that, despite her concerns and lack of training, she was “very thankful that the police showed up as quickly as they did and that the situation seemed under control.”

Tyler Helms, a student who lives off-campus, planned to commentate the soccer game against UNC-Asheville when he learned of the shooter on campus. He was in the press box until the shelter-in-place order was lifted with approximately 20 other people.

As a commuter, Helms was caught off-guard since he was on campus for an event that was so out of character for Gardner-Webb. “The immediate response for me was that I’m a commuter and I normally wouldn’t have been on campus at that time had it not been for working the soccer game,” Helms explained. “Then my response was making sure everyone was okay, and the text message said everyone was.”

Helms’ concern was mainly the confusion caused by the emergency text alerts.

“They didn’t give the all clear, but they said the situation was contained and suspects were in custody, and then 12 minutes later, said, ‘Sike! There’s someone we’re still looking for,’” Helms said. “Then my thought was, ‘What if something happened in those 12 minutes? Are we about to get another text that someone has been shot at?’ Thankfully, we didn’t get that text message.”

Sarah Currie, the Dean of Students, recognized the confusion, but offered an explanation. She received a call about the shots fired on campus, and was on campus by about 6:30 p.m.

“At that point, the three suspects were detained and in custody,” Currie said. The caution tape was up and the scene contained.

“As [police] began to talk to witnesses, they realized they were looking for a person of interest, and they began to scope the campus for that person,” Currie said. She also confirmed the responses went out “pretty expediently” after each new update. “Any situation like this is a fluid situation,” Currie explained. “As [law enforcement] talked to more people, the game of action changed.”

Campus Police Chief Barry Johnson explained what the texts meant when they said the situation was ‘contained.’

“In law enforcement terms, the scene was secure and contained,” Johnson said. “When a scene is secure, that means that the crime scene is taped off and the crime scene is being processed. I mean, it’s a law enforcement term that law enforcement people understand.”

Johnson recognizes how civilians may not be familiar with law enforcement lingo, though, and understood how students could be confused.

“The shelter in place [order] was the main thing contained in all of those messages sent. That was the most important thing. We’ll work on that, though, to eliminate any confusion in those messages, but it was a fast-moving situation,” Johnson stated.

During the span of a few hours, while the campus was on lockdown, many students communicated with each other and friends and family off campus through texts and social media. With the assistance of technology, word travels quickly, which can be to the benefit and detriment of students.

“There is a role for social media if it’s used correctly. I think the other part, too, is people just want information, and sometimes they don’t even care if it’s the right information,” Currie explained. “Sometimes, in the absence of information, people create information... In the best-case scenario, social media keeps people safe. In the worst-case scenario, it creates undue stress and anxiety. You should always rely back on what is being reported to you by the authorities in control.”

President Frank Bonner said that the possibility of social media playing a major role in the events on campus was not off of the university’s radar.

“Our marketing and communications staff was monitoring social media the whole time,” he said. “They are experts at monitoring social media, and they were very aware that a lot of information was going to go out.” These staff members kept watch for misinformation that could be spread.

No definite changes have been made yet for changes to emergency protocol, although faculty and staff are working to make revisions. Several times a year, the emergency response team reworks parts of their plan for emergencies and runs through scenarios that they need to consider, but when an actual incident occurs, the emergency response team learns from the incident as well.

“I think we all realized from the shooting that we need to tighten up on some things,” Currie said. “The appropriate people have debriefed it to say, ‘What went well, what didn’t, and how can we continue to move forward?’, but ultimately, we’re just thankful that it wasn’t worse and was contained quickly.”

President Bonner was happy with the response by university police, highway patrol, the Cleveland County sheriff, and Boiling Springs police, but held an after-action review meeting to walk through everything that happened and learn how to improve. He has asked staff to review procedures and to come back to him and talk to him about revision of those procedures.

Bonner also pointed out that the Title IX training sent to all students via email included a section on active shooters. “We can’t force a student to go watch a training video—there’s just no way we can do it,” Bonner explains. All we can do is make it available and urge people to watch it.”

Bonner and Currie understood that the shooting could be traumatic to some students, and both urged students to seek counseling if they are still struggling to cope with what occurred.

The shooting on campus was unexpected by the student body, faculty and staff because of the nature of the campus, but Chief Johnson wants students to know they are not alone. “We all went through this together, and we all learned from it, and we all can do a better job of protecting ourselves,” Johnson said.

“It was great how students responded to shelter in place. It’s great how faculty responded in classroom settings. It was great that the law enforcement had the response that it had,” Johnson continued. “We just have to be vigilant about what’s going on around us, and if you see a situation that you think has the potential to develop into a dangerous situation, you need to let somebody know that. The community is the eyes and ears of law enforcement.”