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Prosecution deferred in snowball fight

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, March 03, 2009

Authorities deferred prosecution Tuesday against a teen arrested and charged with hitting an officer with a snowball on the campus of East Carolina University.

Steven Rashad Bass was in Pitt County District Court on charges of assault on a government official and resisting, delaying and obstructing a law enforcement officer.

Deferred prosecution means the charges won't be pressed unless the student is charged with another crime in the future, a court official said.

Officials say the 18-year-old ECU student was among more than 200 students who participated in a snowball fight on Jan. 20 when several inches of snow fell in the area.

Officials said a campus police officer used pepper spray on a group of students that rushed officers trying to make an arrest.

No serious injuries had been reported among the students participating in the melee.
UK university launches MA on the Beatles

The Associated Press

Wednesday, March 04, 2009

LONDON — The city of Liverpool already has a Beatles museum and its airport is named after John Lennon. Now a local university says it rolling out a graduate program entirely devoted to the Fab Four.

Liverpool Hope University said Tuesday that its new master's program, "The Beatles, Popular Music and Society," would give students the opportunity to analyze music and culture through the band's work.

"There have been over 8,000 books about the Beatles but there has never been serious academic study and that is what we are going to address," said Mike Brocken, who is directing the program at the university, which is in the band's hometown in northwestern England.

Brocken said students would be expected to study the Beatles' songs, stardom, hometown and cultural impact through four 12-week courses and a dissertation.

Brocken said studying the band was really a way of examining society as a whole.

"If popular music is about anything, it's about people," he said. "If we look at popular culture, it simply provides us with a very complex mirror of ourselves."

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On the Net:

Liverpool Hope University: http://www.hope.ac.uk/

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March 3, 2009 - 12:27 p.m. EDT

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A student climbs one of the dual stone staircases leading to the reading room and exhibition hall at the Wilson Library. Public sections of the library aren't restricted.
Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

Michael Pierce, who works for UNC-Chapel Hill's Facilities Planning Department, checks over floor plans for the library. Multiple floors of stacks, some of which are visible behind Pierce, are restricted because of fire code violations.
Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

Fire laws close off trove of N.C. history

UNC-CH's Wilson Library needs a $12 million upgrade

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - With North Carolina mired in economic crisis, UNC-Chapel Hill's Wilson Library, home to some of the state's oldest records and rarest books, is stuck in state-mandated paralysis.
A year ago, the state fire marshal’s office came close to shutting the 80-year-old building down after finding a slew of fire-code violations. Regulators eventually backed off, instead imposing significant restrictions on how the university can use more than half of the building. One key concern: There aren’t enough exits.

Until a sprinkler system is installed and two new exterior stairwells are added, at least 60 percent of the 300,000-square-foot library’s usable space is essentially off limits for any use other than storage, said Susan Gentry, chief code consultant with the state fire marshal’s office. That means no offices, no staff work spaces, no people allowed until the university can find $10 million to $12 million to start the retrofitting.

And there’s the problem. The state is slashing funding to universities, and the project isn’t at the top of the campus construction priority list.

"It’s looking pretty bleak," said Sarah Michalak, the university librarian. "They just feel Wilson is one of the most unsafe buildings on campus. And we don’t have the money."

This library is full of one-of-a-kind items that help tell North Carolina’s story. The Sir Walter Raleigh Rooms include an oil portrait, dating from 1593, of the man for whom the Capital City was named. A 2001 exhibit, now in storage, offered up artifacts, publications, audio recordings and photos of another North Carolina icon -- Andy Griffith. And in the Southern Historical Collection, you can view the writings of Sam Ervin, Walker Percy and even George Washington.

Amid all this history, state inspectors last year found a building rife with problems. Doors were locked that shouldn’t have been. Exit pathways were blocked by boxes, carts and stacks of books. Fire alarm pull stations were obstructed, and there weren’t enough signs marking the way to exits.

"It’s a maze," said Gentry, the state official. "In a panic situation, people don’t have time to think. It has to lay out where the exits are."

Library officials fixed some of the problems and are also instituting a "fire watch" -- essentially a person who continually checks areas of the library that don’t have smoke alarms to make sure no fires are starting.

But until the sprinklers are installed and the stairways are built, the restrictions will hamstring even the areas of the building that do comply with the fire code. No modification -- like turning two offices into one conference room, for example -- is allowed until the entire building is brought up to code. Even a recent request to place some public seating in the library’s entry foyer -- just feet from the front door -- was denied, said Michael Pierce, a campus planner.

The library’s problems actually run deeper than the $12 million needed for sprinklers and stairwells. Campus planners say the total cost to update the building runs close to $47 million because it also needs a new heating and air conditioning system. A stairwell running top to bottom in the 10-floor building needs replacing; its clearance is so low that anyone of above-average height risks clunking a forehead trying to navigate the stairs.

**Haphazard history**

Built in 1929, the library underwent two major additions, the first in 1952, the second in 1977. It was modified over the years as needed until it became a mish-mash -- a wall added here, a door removed there, often without regard to safety codes.

The restrictions imposed by the state aren’t evident to visitors, because the public sections of the library, like the high-ceilinged reading room and the Southern Historical Collection, aren’t restricted.
But the library's inner sanctum, the dimly lit, musty stacks that seem to stretch for miles, is in flux. Some areas are usable, if they're within either 75 or 100 feet of an exit -- the regulation differs depending on the use of the space.

But long stretches are not, creating problems for library officials who would like to make better use of space now solely devoted to the storage of bound, decades-old copies of obscure academic journals like the International Journal of Peptide and Protein Research and the Netherlands Journal of Plant Pathology.

While campus planners say they're frustrated by Wilson Library's plight, several other projects are higher priorities -- including a $260 million biomedical imaging facility, a $95 million new law school building and a $58 million expansion to the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center. There's little money available for those projects either.

And yet university officials acknowledge that Wilson holds a special place in the heart of this campus.

Built with limestone, it is an iconic structure anchoring the southern end of Polk Place, one of two main campus quads. It is ornate inside and out and is home to the North Carolina Collection, the Rare Book Collection and other troves of treasure from which citizens can better understand their heritage.

All of which explains why Michalak and other university officials would like the library to be more versatile. And safe.

"The people of North Carolina have a real reverence for Wilson Library," Michalak said. "It has to be cared for."

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**FIXING WILSON**

UNC-Chapel Hill's 80-year-old, 300,000-square-foot Wilson Library has two major needs that must be met before it complies fully with fire safety codes. Until those additions are done, more than half of the library's usable space will remain largely restricted.

1. A sprinkler system.
2. Two exterior stairwells installed.

TOTAL COST? $12 million.

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Docs seek gag orders to stop patients' reviews

BY LINDSEY TANNER, AP Medical Writer

CHICAGO - The anonymous comment on the Web site RateMDs.com was unsparing: "Very unhelpful, arrogant," it said of a doctor. "Did not listen and cut me off, seemed much too happy to have power (and abuse it!) over suffering people." Such reviews are becoming more common as consumer ratings services like Zagat's and Angie's List expand beyond restaurants and plumbers to medical care, and some doctors are fighting back.

They're asking patients to agree to what amounts to a gag order that bars them from posting negative comments online.

"Consumers and patients are hungry for good information" about doctors, but Internet reviews provide just the opposite, contends Dr. Jeffrey Segal, a North Carolina neurosurgeon who has made a business of helping doctors monitor and prevent online criticism.

Some sites "are little more than tabloid journalism without much interest in constructively improving practices," and their sniping comments can unfairly ruin a doctor's reputation, Segal said.

Segal said such postings say nothing about what should really matter to patients - a doctor's medical skills - and privacy laws and medical ethics prevent leave doctors powerless to do anything it.

His company, Medical Justice, is based in Greensboro, N.C. For a fee, it provides doctors with a standardized waiver agreement. Patients who sign agree not to post online comments about the doctor, "his expertise and/or treatment."

"Published comments on Web pages, blogs and/or mass correspondence, however well intended, could severely damage physician's practice," according to suggested wording the company provides.

Segal's company advises doctors to have all patients sign the agreements. If a new patient refuses, the doctor might suggest finding another doctor. Segal said he knows of no cases where longtime patients have been turned away for not signing the waivers.

Doctors are notified when a negative rating appears on a Web site, and, if the author's name is known, physicians can use the signed waivers to get the sites to remove offending opinion.

RateMD's postings are anonymous, and the site's operators say they do not know their users' identities. The operators also won't remove negative comments.

Angie's List' operators know the identities of users and warn them when they register that the site will share names with doctors if asked.

Since Segal's company began offering its service two years ago, nearly 2,000 doctors have signed up. In several instances, he said, doctors have used signed waivers to get sites to remove negative comments.
John Swapceinski, co-founder of RateMDs.com, said that in recent months, six doctors have asked him to remove negative online comments based on patients' signed waivers. He has refused.

"They’re basically forcing the patients to choose between health care and their First Amendment rights, and I really find that repulsive," Swapceinski said.

He said he's planning to post a "Wall of Shame" listing names of doctors who use patient waivers.

Segal, of Medical Justice, said the waivers are aimed more at giving doctors ammunition against Web sites than against patients. Still, the company’s suggested wording warns that breaching the agreement could result in legal action against patients.

Attorney Jim Speta, a Northwestern University Internet law specialist, questioned whether such lawsuits would have much success.

"Courts might say the balance of power between doctors and patients is very uneven" and that patients should be able to give feedback on their doctors' performance, Speta said.

Angie Hicks, founder of Angie's List, said her company surveyed more than 1,000 of its consumer members last month, and most said they had never been presented with a waiver; 3 percent said they would sign one.

About 6,000 doctors reviewed on the Angie's List site also were asked to comment. Only 74 responded, and about a fifth of them said they would consider using them.

Lenore Janecek, who formed a Chicago-based patient-advocacy group after being wrongly diagnosed with cancer, said she opposes the waivers.

"Everyone has the right to speak up," she said.

While she’s never posted comments about her doctors, she said the sites are one of the few resources patients have to evaluate physicians.

The American Medical Association has taken no position on patient waivers, but President Dr. Nancy Nielsen has said previously that online doctor ratings sites "have many shortcomings."

Online doctor reviews "should be taken with a grain of salt, and should certainly not be a patient's sole source of information when looking for a new physician," she said.

Dr. Lauren Streicher, a Chicago gynecologist, got a glowing recent review on Angie's List, but also remembers a particularly snarky rating from a patient angry about getting brisk treatment after arriving 30 minutes late to her appointment.

She said she sympathizes with doctors who ask patients to sign a waiver.

Streicher said she has seen shoddy doctors praised online who she would not trust "to deliver my mail much less my baby." Conversely, bad reviews can destroy good doctors' careers, she said.

"Are there bad doctors out there? Absolutely, but this is not a good way to figure it out," Streicher said.

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