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More than 100 people attended the memorial, which was held at the student's apartment complex.

By Estes Thompson
The Associated Press

DURHAM — A slain Duke University graduate student was remembered Monday as a man who not only excelled in his specialty — computational mechanics — but also as someone who appreciated books and cooking.

"Nothing could have been more out of context for Abhijit than the violence that took him from us," said Todd Laurhsen, the faculty adviser for Abhijit Mahato, 29.

More than 100 people attended the memorial service for Mahato, held at the same complex where Mahato was found dead Jan. 18 in his apartment a few blocks from the Duke campus.

Mahato, a native of Tataggar, India, was studying for a doctorate in computational mechanics at Duke's Pratt School of Engineering.

"He's a wonderful person ... always laughing," said Tanmay Patni, who was Mahato's roommate for 10 months. "I'm really, really going to miss him."

Ed Triplett, a biochemistry graduate student at Duke who lives in the same complex, said Mahato told him he had moved to the apartment complex where he died because he didn't think his previous apartment was safe.

Several Durham police officers, including the investigators in Mahato's case, also held candles as they stood at the edge of the vigil.

Vigil coordinator Anna Lee Mosley said the event was sponsored by the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, Parents of Murdered Children and Durham Congregations in Action.

A grand jury has indicted two teenagers in Mahato's death: Laurence Lovette, 17, and Stephen Oates, 19, both of Durham. Lovette also is charged in the murder of the Eve Carson, the student body president at the University of North Carolina. A memorial service was held last week for her on the UNC campus.

The autopsy on Mahato said he was shot at point-blank range in the forehead as a pillow was held tightly against his face. His wallet, cell phone and iPod were missing.

Carson was also shot in the head, once in the right temple. Her wallet and keys were missing.
BRIEFS
FROM STAFF REPORTS

ORANGE COUNTY

Study: Obese women skip cancer tests

CHAPEL HILL — Obesity may keep some women from getting routine cancer screenings, according to a new UNC-Chapel Hill study.

The study found obese white women were less likely than healthy-weight women to get the recommended screenings for breast and cervical cancer, according to the UNC-CH School of Public Health. The trend was not as consistent among black women.

“Our review doesn’t tell us why larger women are not getting screened as frequently for these cancers; it only reveals the trend,” said Sarah S. Cohen, lead author of the article published online by the American Cancer Society.

The study is available at www.interscience.wiley.com.

UNC campus to test emergency sirens

CHAPEL HILL — UNC-Chapel Hill will test new emergency sirens Wednesday between 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

The test will focus on sirens that would be used in case of a life-threatening emergency such as an armed and dangerous person on or near campus, a major chemical spill or hazard, or a tornado sighting.
Too many secrets

State agencies use personnel laws to hide too much information from the public. Some modernization is needed, and now.

Those who work for the public — accepting a taxpayer-paid salary and benefits, retirement plan, etc. — should reasonably have to expect that most of their working life, from those financial figures to any disciplinary actions taken against them, will be on the public record.

That may not be comfortable for some, but the official affairs of those who conduct the people’s business, whether they are accountants or law enforcement officers or any number of other types of employees, must be in the open. That’s simply one of the important principles of the American form of government.

In North Carolina, however, that principle too often is overlooked. To justify secrecy, supervisors in various agencies have been using the state’s personnel law, which keeps secret information such as job applications, performance reviews, criminal background checks and investigations of possible misconduct. That’s wrong, and it needs to be changed.

The personnel law has even been used to hide information regarding the theft and misuse of state funds and property, which is appalling. That’s somewhat of a change in policy since a News & Observer report in 2002 illustrated the level of theft in state government and identifying some of those involved. The newspaper also wrote that some state agencies weren’t even filling out reports required in such incidents.

Not long after that report, Robin Pendergraph, director of the State Bureau of Investigation, shut down access to the information. She told agencies to fill out a one-page form that doesn’t ask who was involved and doesn’t provide much information. The reason? According to another SBI staff member, some thought the information was protected by the personnel act. Here are some other things that have been cited as not accessible under the state’s personnel law, as noted by The N&O’s Dan Kane in an article Sunday:

- A state Highway Patrol trooper pounds on a married couple’s door in the early morning and confronts them about a run-in on the roadway involving the trooper, other vehicles and the couple that had occurred two days earlier. He threatens to arrest one of the two people. The incident occurred while the trooper was off-duty. They complained. The Highway Patrol commander, Fletcher Clay, wrote to them that they weren’t allowed to know the outcome of their complaint. He said the law wouldn’t allow him to disclose “information pertaining to personnel actions.”

- In November of 2002, officials with four state universities refused to identify former employees who had been reported to the SBI for suspicion of stealing, improper spending or damaging property.

- A state audit, reported in April of last year, found that a 30-year “higher level” employee at UNC-Chapel Hill had been providing a Social Security number of a deceased person for identification purposes. The employee retired that month and is getting a pension. UNC-CH officials said they couldn’t identify the employee or comment further.

Under the law, officials may disclose otherwise privileged personnel information if necessary to uphold an agency’s integrity. Sometimes, that option is used. But it isn’t used often enough, even when integrity is very much on the line.

Clearly, there are officials either using the personnel law to keep secrets just because they want to, or perhaps because the law itself is unclear. Yes, there may be some information involving personnel problems — mental or physical illness, family difficulties — that would warrant confidentiality. But there are not many, and the umbrella that some have used to cover what certainly are embarrassing episodes is too big.

The inclination to sweep information about misconduct or incompetence under the rug is understandable. The bad news can reflect poorly not just on the employee involved, but on managers, or on those who championed a person’s hiring.

Still, this has to be fixed. The public has a right to government that operates openly. And a right to know about the conduct of its employees — especially when the public trust has been abused.