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ECU chancellor: Campus remains safe despite recent shooting deaths

Like the rest of the campus community, I was shocked and saddened by the senseless shooting that left an ECU student and another innocent bystander dead in downtown Greenville. On behalf of the university, I extend our deepest sympathy and condolences to the families and friends of the victims.

In times such as these, as we search for answers and wonder what we should perhaps do differently, it is important to remember that East Carolina University is a safe campus. This is especially important for parents to know as they bring new students to campus for orientation sessions.

Yes, we have crime and occasional violence on and near our campus, but those events are more a reflection of the society we live in than a constant threat to our students, employees and visitors. The university’s annual crime and safety report, required by federal law, is available at this link: http://tinyurl.com/ecu-safety.

We work every day to make the campus a safer environment. We have, for instance, in recent years invested in new technology that enables us to better communicate with individuals on campus and with neighboring law enforcement agencies (outdoor speakers; video message boards; VOIP telephones; text-messaging systems; new radio systems). We have increased the number and visibility of our police officers. We have hired a new police chief and are working on a reorganization of our campus safety reporting lines.

We have also ramped up our training and preparedness. We have conducted joint exercises with other law-enforcement agencies both on and off-campus in preparation for such incidents as chemical spills and active shooters. We have developed detailed plans for other safety threats such as the pandemic flu.

And we are pleased with the commitment and action of the city of Greenville in dealing with crime in the city. Since William Anderson arrived in Greenville as chief of the city’s police force three years ago, he has made great strides in confronting crime throughout the city. He has initiated anti-gang efforts and he has increased downtown patrols.

Cooperation between ECU Police and the Greenville force has never been greater; Chief Anderson has noted that GPD has “a great working relationship” with the ECU force. It is also important to note that the Greenville mayor is a retired ECU faculty member and one member of the City Council is a member of our faculty. Obviously they are committed to a safe environment for their university.

In closing, I believe that Bill Koch, our associate vice chancellor for environmental health and safety, summarized the current situation very well when he said:

“Continuous improvement is the foundation of our safety programs at ECU. Every incident requires us to assess our plans and make the necessary adjustments to help our students stay safe.

“As we mourn our loss, we strengthen our safety commitment to our students and their families. We have already begun this process by working with the Greenville Police Department and other campus units to assess and further improve safety for our students on campus and in the surrounding area.”

Dr. Steve Ballard is the chancellor of East Carolina University.
Tuesday's events paint surprising picture of shooting suspect

By Michael Abramowitz  
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, July 01, 2009

A former professional basketball player suspected in a double homicide on Tuesday was a skilled athlete determined to exceed expectations, his former coaches said Wednesday.

James Earl Richardson, 32, was still at large on Wednesday after an ECU student and a pizza parlor manager were killed in a drive-by shooting on Fifth Street in the downtown Greenville club district. Arrest warrants have been drawn charging Richardson with two counts of murder in the incident.

Greenville Police Chief William Anderson said Wednesday he is confident Richardson will be caught soon. Police also have identified the men who were with him on Tuesday at The Other Place club before shots rang out about 2 a.m., Anderson said.

Richardson graduated from J.H. Rose High School in 1996. He attended Lenoir Community College and went on to play college basketball at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania in 1999-2000. He played professionally for teams in France, Bulgaria and elsewhere in Europe.

He was a coach in the Continental Basketball Association in 2006 for the Albany Patroons.

Richardson "was a typical teenager; you know how that goes," said Jerry Woodside, Richardson's basketball coach at Rose.

"He did everything I ever asked and we got along really well. I never had any problems with James. I'm appalled at this situation," Woodside said.

Richardson surpassed all expectations athletically, his coach said, demonstrating a determination to learn and excel.

Richardson impressed Woodside as a more mature person when he came home to visit from his travels, the coach said.

"I think James accomplished a lot on his way up, and I think people sold him short. He went on and did well for himself. Troubles don't fit the picture I had of him. When my wife and I saw his picture, I was in shock, couldn't believe it," Woodside said.

"I remember him well," said Ron Vincent, one of Richardson's coaches at Rose. "I hadn't seen him recently, but I thought he had his life together."

Richardson would visit his coaches at Rose when he returned from college and his time spent playing in Europe, Vincent said, but had not turned up for the last couple of years.

There was nothing in his behavior while a student at the high school that indicated to Vincent that the Richardson's future might include being a homicide suspect, he said.

"He was mischievous but never mean," a shocked Vincent said.

Tuesday's events paint a different picture.

According to witnesses, Richardson and several other men spent hours at Unk's, a club on Jarvis Street,
before heading to The Other Place.

Richardson and his group arrived at Unk's between 9:30-10 p.m. and left between 12:30-1 a.m., according to Unk's manager Mike Boone. "They got louder as the night went on, but weren't disruptive or threatening to anyone," Boone said.

They arrived at The Other Place before closing time, according to employees and patrons who asked to remain anonymous. The club was crowded, particularly for a Monday night. They had been there half an hour before an altercation started.

Richardson may have had trouble getting a drink, one employee said. "It wasn't anything major; it was stupid," the employee said. "No blows got thrown, nobody got touched."

Bouncers escorted the men outside, where one of the men made threatening comments, the employee said.

A short time later a white BMW drove west on Fifth from the Stop Shop. Eight shots rang out, according to witness accounts. Fire flashed from the gun as the car drove by.

Friends saw Kirby and Blackley get hit and fall to the ground. Bystanders tried to stop the bleeding and administer chest compressions.

It's unclear how long Richardson has been in Greenville, where he was living or whether he was employed.

But police believe he was angry enough about being ejected from The Other Place to pull a gun from the trunk of his car and drive past the nightclub spraying the front with bullets.

Some of the shots hit killed two men, Charles Andrew "Drew" Kirby, 29, manager of Michaelangelo's Pizza, located across the street from the club, and Edgar Landon Blackley, 21, an East Carolina University student.

Officers have developed a strong case against their suspect, thanks to information provided by witnesses and staff at The Other Place, Chief Anderson said Wednesday.

Investigators located the BMW at 11 a.m. Tuesday parked on McDowell Street, he said.

The chief also said surveillance cameras mounted on poles on the street might have recorded the vehicle driving from the scene, but investigators were reviewing the footage.

Associate editor Bobby Burns contributed to this report. Contact Michael Abramowitz at mabramowitz@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9571.

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Officials, business owners outline safety steps

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, June 30, 2009

Business practices and police activities, particularly those related to alcohol service, must change to promote safety in Greenville's downtown nightclub district, a group of owners and government officials agreed Wednesday.

Mayor Pat Dunn moderated a meeting of law enforcement officers, business owners and city officials at the Tavern on Fourth in the wake of the homicide Tuesday of an East Carolina University student and a downtown pizza parlor manager outside The Other Place on Fifth Street.

The incident has raised questions about the safety of the downtown area. Owners and workers from more than a dozen establishments discussed the issue with police, city administrators including manager Wayne Bowers, and elected officials including Mayor Pat Dunn and several City Council members.

Business owners said they would be mindful of promotions that contribute to troubling behavior downtown, such as drink specials that make it easy for patrons to overindulge.

James Sasser of the Pitt County Drug and Alcohol Enforcement unit said officers need to do a better job of enforcing existing laws, such as rules that require private clubs to ban nonmembers and check memberships at the door.

"The law that allows clubs to charge as little as a penny or a nickel for a beer does nothing but promote alcoholism and drunkenness," Sasser said.

Greenville Police Chief William Anderson said the department has been evaluating conditions and circumstances that exist in the area and will adjust tactics and operations to accommodate security needs. He said adjusting practices is a normal function of the department's downtown deployment plan, implemented in 2006 to curtail disruptive behavior in the nightclub district.

The department normally has a smaller presence in the area on Monday and Tuesday nights, one or two patrol officers, and deploys more than 20 on weekends, he said. Following Tuesday's homicide, the department will increase its visible presence during non-peak periods, Anderson said.

It also will expand patrol areas and redeploy officers to points where police presence is most needed, he said.

Two cameras are mounted in the area, and portable lighting is available and used during peak hours and special events, Anderson said.

The department spends approximately $400,000 each year to police the downtown area between Wednesdays and Saturdays, the chief said.

East Carolina University Police are also a part of the downtown and campus area patrol plan, Chief Scott Shelton said.

"Chancellor (Steve) Ballard is committed to the safety of all citizens of the (ECU) community. He has given me the resources to assign extra ECU officers to the downtown area and other campus neighborhood areas," Shelton said.

A consensus of the group was that a mechanism is necessary for better communication among business people, city officials and law enforcement, including regular meetings.
They asked Dunn to coordinate and facilitate the meetings, and the mayor agreed to do that.

"The city is concerned about downtown safety," the mayor said.

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Edgar L. Blackley

Edgar Landon Blackley, 21, a resident of Granville County, died Tuesday, June 30th. Landon was a 2006 Kerr Vance Academy graduate and a rising senior at East Carolina University. Memorial service will be conducted at 2:00 p.m. Friday, July 3, 2009 at Oxford United Methodist Church. Interment will be private. Surviving are his parents, Lennie and Laura Dean Blackley; a brother, Nash; and a sister, Carson. The maternal grandparents are Frances and Marion Dean, and the paternal grandparents are Lorraine Blackley and the late Edgar Blackley. Aunts and uncles are Charles and Beth Dean, Dale and Sandra Pruitt; Bobby and Ann Tunstall. Cousins include, Scott and Harper Pruitt, Rob and Elizabeth Tunstall. Visitation is from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday, July 2, 2009 at the Eakes Funeral Home in Oxford. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to Oxford United Methodist Church, P.O. Box 757, Oxford, N.C. 27565. Online condolences can be made at www.eakesfuneralhome.com select obits.

Published in The News & Observer on 7/2/2009
Tests for H1N1 flu come back negative for PCMH employee

By Ginger Livingston
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, July 01, 2009

A Pitt County Memorial Hospital health care worker tested for H1N1 flu last week didn't have the virus, a spokeswoman reported.

The hospital received test results from the state health lab Wednesday, hospital spokeswoman Barbara Dunn said. The worker, whose name and position was not released, will return to work once the hospital's occupational health provider has cleared the person, Dunn said.

While the hospital worker didn't have the flu virus, the Division of Public Health reported Wednesday the state had 76 new cases of H1N1 flu this week, including two new cases in Pitt County. That increases the county's number of cases to six and the state's number to 255.

Dr. John Morrow, Pitt County public health director, said one of the new cases was reported from a private doctor's office, and the other report came from a medical facility outside of the county.

"If these are residents of Pitt County and go for health care somewhere else, the tests are sent off and the results are sent here," he said.

While Pitt County is seeing a slight increase in the number of reported flu cases, Morrow said people should take normal precautions to protect themselves.

"I think the fact that this virus has not changed and we are not seeing a high mortality rate as we have in the past means people should be treating this as a seasonal flu, which means getting plenty of rest, fluids and Tylenol," he said.

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Special day for Marvin k. Blount

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, July 01, 2009

The courtroom is often a place of sorrow, hard lessons and justice.

Wednesday afternoon, the mood in the Pitt County Court House was jubilant as officials and the family and friends of Marvin K. Blount III watched as he was sworn in as a special superior court judge.

Blount's daughter, Eleanor, held the Bible for the local attorney as he took the oath, administered by Superior Court Judge Clifton W. Everett Jr., and he was robed by his wife and law partner, Rebecca.

He expressed his thanks to those in attendance and Gov. Bev Perdue, who was not present but appointed him to the position in early June. Blount replaces semi-retired emergency Judge Thomas D. Haigwood.

"I'm very appreciative of the governor's confidence in me," Blount told those assembled. "I'm looking forward to the opportunity not only to serve in this county but in the great state of North Carolina."

He said he hopes to be a fair, impartial and independent-minded judge.

Preceding his swearing, several judges from Pitt County and beyond spoke on Blount's behalf. The remarks were light and encouraging.

"Having been a special superior court judge, I know something of the challenges he faces," John B. Lewis Jr., who retired from the North Carolina Court of Appeals, said. "Actually, when I started, it wasn't a pay cut (to become a judge). So there have been some changes."

The base salary for special judges is $124,382 — the same rate paid to elected superior court judges, according to the N.C. Administrative Office of the Courts. When asked if another special judge is necessary during a deficit budget year, a member of Perdue's staff said their roles are vital.

"These positions are especially valuable during difficult times," press secretary Chrissy Pearson said. "Unlike regular superior court judges, special judges are not tied to a county and are available to go across the state as needed to handle complex cases and fill in for other judges."

There are 12 special superior court judges in North Carolina, and they hear cases at the direction of the state's chief justice.

Lewis spoke to the legacy of the Blount family in the area and in law. Blount's father, grandfather, aunt, wife "and cousins by the dozens" have worked in the courts, he noted.

"You will be offered much advice in this courtroom," Lewis said before adding his own. "(I was told) Always carry a pen. Somebody might want to write you a check. I will say the same thing ... but because a lawyer might want you to sign a consent order."

Everett, who attended law school with Blount's father, also spoke briefly before administering the oath. It was a rare appearance for the judge, whose health has suffered in recent months. He discussed his medical struggles and thanked those who have sent well-wishes, prayers and flowers his way.

"What I've been through in the last year, I'm glad to be anywhere," Everett said. "On Earth. The doctor put me on a short leash ... about six months short."

He said he spent more than three weeks at a Chapel Hill hospital and another three at Duke — hard for a man with two degrees from Wake Forest, he said.
And even that news was met with laughter as he recounted telling the doctor, "I do not want to die in Chapel Hill. My friends would never understand. Put me on a gurney and wheel me out to Pittsboro."

Blount thanked Everett for participating and said that though he hoped to be respected as much as a judge, he knew his storytelling skills would never surpass Everett's.

Contact Kathryn Kennedy at kkennedy@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9586.
Easley's appeal may be doomed

Chancellor says N.C. State does not have the money to offer the former first lady a settlement.

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

N.C. State University is highly unlikely to negotiate a settlement with former first lady Mary Easley, who earlier this week indicated she will appeal her firing, the university’s new leader said Wednesday.

NCSU does not have the money to pay any settlement, Interim Chancellor James Woodward
said in a meeting with editors and reporters at The News & Observer. He added that he stands behind his decision to eliminate Easley's position.

Easley had come under pressure last year when she was given a five-year, $850,000 contract to run a speakers series and create a public safety leadership center. But she was fired this spring after disclosures in The N&O that her job was pushed by her husband, former Gov. Mike Easley, and orchestrated at the highest levels of state government.

Woodward said Wednesday that Easley that "had to know" that her husband, one of his top aides and a member of the university's Board of Trustees played a role in the creation of her job.

"I think she was well aware of the efforts made on her behalf to get her a new job and a new contract," Woodward said. "And those efforts were highly inappropriate."

Easley's attorney, Marvin Schiller, who notified NCSU earlier this week that Easley intends to appeal her firing, declined comment Wednesday.

Easley's appeal will be heard first by a faculty committee, which normally would make a recommendation to the chancellor. But because Woodward has publicly supported Easley's termination, he will not be involved in the grievance process, he said Wednesday. A committee of trustees, new members who were not involved in the firing, will then review the recommendation, Woodward said.

Woodward replaced James Oblingre, who resigned last month as it became apparent that he repeatedly misrepresented his role in Easley's hiring. He also negotiated a deal, subsequently scrapped, that would have paid former Provost Larry Nielsen $310,255 more over the next three years than a salary commensurate with other faculty in the College of Natural Resources, where Nielsen will teach.

Nielsen had said repeatedly that he alone had decided to hire Mary Easley in 2005. Nielsen resigned in May amid questions about his role in her job.

Nielsen will receive six months of pay at $298,700, his annual pay as provost. Then his pay drops to $156,715, which is in line with the other faculty.

Though Woodward quickly invalidated the deal Oblingre created for Nielsen, he nonetheless Wednesday defended the decision to allow both former administrators to retain tenure, continue to earn their administrative salaries for six months after leaving their posts, and return to teaching.

"Once you get tenure, it should be extremely hard to take away," he said. He said their actions did not rise to that level.

While he knows that former Gov. Easley helped orchestrate the creation of Mary Easley's NCSU job in 2005, Woodward said he can't find evidence of a quid pro quo.

"I can't see where N.C. State got anything as a result of that," he said. "What could the governor do that could bring some short-term benefit to N.C. State? I can't identify anything."

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From the interview:

N.C. State's Interim Chancellor James Woodward said:
• One of his immediate tasks is to restore the morale of the university community.

"They're terribly embarrassed; they're mad at those they feel are responsible," he said. "One of my goals has been to help them re-focus on the work that they do."

• He supports a closed search for his successor and said the university is likely gunning for a president or chancellor at a public university. "Successful sitting presidents at major universities cannot let themselves be seen looking for other jobs," he said.

A search committee is being assembled, and a consultant will likely be hired within weeks, he said.

• That the Easley saga, ugly as it is, may have a silver lining.

"This is a big problem for us in the short term," he said. "It will be better for us in the long term, because it has forced a review of a lot of things."

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• Read previous stories about Mary Easley’s job and our Executive Privilege series

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Report: Assistant dean at UNC Charlotte arrested

STEVE LYTTLE, The Charlotte Observer

An assistant dean at UNC Charlotte has been arrested and charged with embezzlement, according to broadcast reports this morning.

Mecklenburg County jail records show an Ashley Postell was arrested Tuesday by UNCC campus police and charged with six counts of embezzlement.

NewsChannel 36, the Observer's news partner, is reporting that the person charged in the case is the same Ashley Postell who is Assistant Dean of Students for Greek Life at UNCC.

Campus officials could not be reached this morning, and Postell could not be reached.

Jail records show Postell, 27, of Charlotte, was arrested around midday Tuesday. She was charged with three counts of embezzlement by a public officer and three counts of embezzlement of state property. She was released on bond.

The assistant dean over Greek Life is responsible for overseeing the activities of sororities and fraternities on campus. At many colleges and universities, the person in that role also handles financial affairs for Greek organizations.

The UNCC Web site shows Ashley Postell came to the university from Dallas in July 2006.

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