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Tufts Takes Stalking Seriously

Campus Group Helps Students Spot Signs Before an Annoyance Becomes a Tragedy

By Sandeep Kaushik, Globe Correspondent

Peggy Barrett, the director of the Women's Center at Tufts University, is doing something that is unusual on college campuses: She is directly tackling the problem of stalking, which studies indicate is nearly twice as prevalent in the university setting as it is among the general population.

Barrett has reason to be concerned. A widely cited study found that 13 percent of campus women reported being stalked over the course of the previous school year.

Stalking is a serious issue at the nation's colleges and universities, researchers and other specialists say, and although interest in the issue is rising among college administrators, it is only just beginning to receive the attention it merits.

Substantial numbers of college students, mostly women, feel harassed and sometimes threatened by recurring unwanted attention, usually directed at them from other students, specialists say. The obsessive behavior, even when it does not rise to the level of a crime, can have profound psychological effects on the victims.

Efforts like those of Barrett are geared to halting stalking behavior before it becomes a criminal matter. Tufts' Women's Center has worked with campus police to develop a stalking policy, has just published an informational brochure for students on stalking, and is working with faculty and staff to train them to recognize warning signs before annoying or harassing behavior morphs into something more threatening.

Several weeks ago, Barrett brought in a specialist from a newly formed Boston-area antistalking organization, Feel Safe Again Inc., to address staff and some students. Cheryl Darisse, the founder of the organization, counsels stalking victims and lobbies for strengthening stalking laws. She began working on the problem after her own sister was killed by a stalker in 1998.

Darisse tells educators and the other audiences she addresses that many victims do not report incidents out of fear that they are not going to be believed. Often, they convince themselves that they are overreacting to the unwanted attention. Other local organizations are working on raising

awareness of the issue as well. Deborah Fallon, the head of Portal to Hope, a nonprofit that aids victims of domestic violence in Everett and surrounding communities, does regular presentations at local colleges. She has spoken to criminal justice classes at Suffolk University and Salem State College and talks to high school students as well. She says her own work on domestic violence has taught her that stalking is often a component of such cases, but often goes unreported.

Barrett hopes that raising awareness will lower the risk of that happening at Tufts. All students go through an orientation program when they arrive at the university where they are presented with statistics about stalking and other forms of harassment and sexual misconduct, and Barrett brings in a rape survivor who was stalked before being attacked to tell her story to the students.

When stalking situations arise at Tufts, the Dean of Students office can issue a “campus stay-away order.” If that does not work, other disciplinary measures can be brought forward, Barrett said. Other universities have similar internal mechanisms for dealing with the problem, and ultimately can rely on law enforcement to intervene.

It is important when a student feels uncomfortable with unwanted attention, he or she should take that seriously. “The important thing is to trust your instincts. If it doesn’t feel right, go with that,” said Tracy Bahm of the Stalking Resource Center at the National Center for Victims of Crime. She also strongly recommends that students who feel they are being stalked begin keeping a log of incidents, including dates, times, and the type of behavior, in case the situation reaches the point that police have to be called in.

According to a 1997 phone survey of 4,446 female students at 223 colleges and universities, released as part of a 2000 study sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, slightly more than 13 percent of college women answered yes when asked if “anyone from stranger to an ex-boyfriend repeatedly followed you, watched you, phoned, written, e-mailed, or communicated with you in other ways that seemed obsessive and made you afraid or concerned for your safety” in the previous seven months, a rate more than twice that of the general population of women.

That number is not a surprise to Bahm. “It’s pretty easy to stalk someone on a college campus,” she said. “There’s a lot of access, and people tend to live in very close quarters.”

When stalking behavior does take place in a campus setting, it often goes unaddressed. In 83 percent of the cases, victims do not report the incidents to law enforcement, though more than 93 percent of the time they confide in someone, usually a friend, according to the survey, which remains the most comprehensive nationwide look at the problem.

Bahm adds, “on the flip side, college campuses offer a lot more resources for victims. There are counseling services, and the administration has a lot more control over students.” And while she cannot provide statistics, she said that the Stalking Resource Center has seen a significant jump in inquiries from campus officials around the country in the last two years about how to handle stalking cases.

The case of Kristin Lardner is a tragic example of what can result when the problem goes unrecognized. In 1992, while a student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Lardner was stalked and eventually killed by a former boyfriend. The case received national attention after Lardner's father, George, a Washington Post reporter, wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of articles about the case.

Most campus stalking cases do not involve actual threats or violence. In the survey, 15.3 percent of women reported incidents involving threats or attempted violence. In 10.3 percent of the cases, the stalker forced or attempted sexual contact.

In Massachusetts, stalking that involves the threat of violence is a criminal act, and can result in a prison term of up to five years.

According to Bahm, while women are far more likely to be stalked than men on campuses, men sometimes are stalked as well. In the majority of those cases, they are stalked by other men, typically a former boyfriend of the victim's current girlfriend.

Even when the stalking incidents are not perceived as threatening, they can have a serious psychological impact, and cause victims to modify their behavior or substantially curtail their activities. According to Connie Kirkland, who heads the sexual assault services office at George Mason University in Virginia, "very many cases end in depression-oriented behavior. There is lots of isolation, a sense of feeling helpless."

Most colleges and universities, including many of those in the Boston area, do not specifically address stalking in their policies, but cover the behavior through codes governing student conduct.

"We want to give everyone a heads up, a warning that it does happen," Barrett said. "We want them to know that we're aware of it and are doing a lot to prevent it."

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