

UNCW gun violence protest recalls Va. Tech victims

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To the beat of a drum, University of North Carolina Wilmington students lay down Wednesday in honor of those killed at Virginia Tech one year ago.

The 32 students remained on the ground beneath the clock tower on UNCW's campus a few minutes – the time it takes to buy a gun in the United States, according to those who organized the demonstration.

The event coincided with 80 remembrances of Virginia Tech nationwide, planned to honor Virginia Tech victims and call for tougher gun laws, organizers said.

Two UNCW students who organized the event Wednesday afternoon went to high school with students killed at Tech and said the event was memorial first, protest second.

"I'm mostly here for my friends," said Ryan Day, a 20-year-old sophomore from Centreville, Va. "But because I'm here for my friends shows there's something wrong with the current gun laws."

In Blacksburg, Va., a larger memorial was held on the Virginia Tech campus where Gov. Timothy M. Kaine told mourners the world had been cheated of 32 extraordinary lives.

Remembrance and demonstrations

On April 16, 2007, Seung Hui-Cho killed 32 students and shot numerous others before killing himself.

Leaders of the UNCW "lie-in" said the killing of two of their high school friends at Tech compelled them to bring the event to Wilmington.



STAFF PHOTO BY MIKE SPENCER/ STAR NEWS

University of North Carolina at Wilmington students gather on campus and hold signs with names of those killed in the Virginia Tech shooting to honor the anniversary of the shooting Wednesday, April 16, 2008.

A "lie-in" is a demonstration modeled after similar protests conducted by a gun control advocacy group called ProtestEasyGuns.com, which formed in the wake of last year's massacre.

The group supported six remembrances in North Carolina, said Roxane Kolar, executive director of North Carolinians Against Gun Violence, which also pushes for stricter gun control.

Paige Harrison, an 18-year-old freshman from Chantilly, Va., who organized the UNCW event said campus shootings show tougher gun laws are needed.

"Every day people all over America die from gun homicide," she said in a written statement. "It's outrageous and it needs to stop."

The 32 students in the UNCW event each held a sign naming a student killed at Virginia Tech. Austin Cloyd, Juan Ortiz, Brian Bluhm, Maxine Turner – the same names called out at a ceremony in Blacksburg.

On Tech's campus the names were followed by a listing of accomplishments and dreams that won't be realized, according to the Associated Press.

Music played, bells tolled and people sobbed. One woman collapsed in tears and was helped away by EMT's.

At UNCW, 15 to 20 students watched the smaller, more subdued memorial. Matthew Russell, a freshman from Chapel Hill, said he liked having a memorial at his school. And the image of fellow students lying down drove home how many young people were killed, he said.

Eliza Bystrycki, a freshman from Greensboro, said Sept. 11, 2001, is a date she always remembers. But April 16, 2007, also should be remembered, she said, especially on college campuses.

Several students involved in the protest said part of honoring those killed is taking steps to prevent mass shootings from happening again. For them, that means toughening laws that govern criminal background checks needed to buy guns.

Jillian Wisse, a freshman from Raleigh, said she's surprised that after shootings at Tech, and Northern Illinois University, nothing's been done to toughen gun laws.

Kolar, who helped organize several protests in North Carolina, said a few legal changes could help keep guns from dangerous people.

In numerous states, she said, guns are sold at gun shows without criminal background checks. In North Carolina, she said, the "gun show loophole" applies only to sales of shotguns and rifles.

Another change, which would have applied to the Tech shooter, is requiring states to put mental health information into the federal database used in background checks, she said.

The federal government has set aside money to improve the process, Kolar said, but states still need to ensure the mental health information is reported.

Paul Valone, president of Grass Roots of North Carolina, which lobbies for the rights of gun owners, said it's a myth that guns are easy to get.

In North Carolina, a prospective handgun buyer must get a permit from a sheriff, which requires one background check. A second check is done at the time of purchase. And while a permit isn't needed for rifles and shotguns, Valone said, N.C. buyers still go through a background check during the purchase, even at gun shows.

As for the Tech shooter, Cho was found to be dangerous and should have been taken off the streets but wasn't, Valone said.

If people want to reduce violence, they should use proven methods, he said, adding that studies have found that law-abiding citizens carrying guns deters crime.

His was a vastly different solution than the one students favored at UNCW on Wednesday.

One of those involved in the protest said everyone, whether on a college campus or not, wants to honor those killed on April 16.

"Everybody feels the same way I do," said Skyler Bunn, a 19-year-old demonstrator who said getting dangerous weapons should be tougher.

"Everybody feels sorry for what happened," he said. "I just wanted to do a little extra."

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