



In Memory: College students join demonstrations in honor of Virginia Tech victims

Journal Photos by Walt Unks

Danielle Rogers, a senior from Winston-Salem, and other WSSU drama students stage a "lie-in" at the university's clock tower.

By Dan Galindo JOURNAL REPORTER Published: April 17, 2008

Thirty-two demonstrators dropped slowly to the ground at Winston-Salem State University's clock tower.

Wearing maroon-and-orange ribbons, they staged the "lie-in" to remind students passing by of the terrible violence that struck Virginia Tech a year ago yesterday.

Others joined in, but the 32 ribbons were deliberate -- one to mark each person killed by Seung-Hui Cho in the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

Other school shootings have followed, including one in February at Northern Illinois University in which a gunman killed five people and then himself.

"We want the world to know that we are not desensitized to what happened at Virginia Tech," said Avis Gray, a drama instructor whose students were part of the lie-in.

The lie-in was one of six in the state and among more than 70 held across the country held by gun-control advocates.

The WSSU students said that their lie-in was meant to draw attention to the ease with which Cho, who had been treated for mental illness, was able to buy the guns he used.

They said they hope that it helps restart a debate about gun control.

"We kind of get immune to it ... instead of trying to do something about it," said Stanley Johnson, a junior at WSSU.

The lie-ins were organized by North Carolinians Against Gun Violence, a group that is lobbying state legislators to pass bills to strengthen gun-control laws. The group also runs educational campaigns on gun safety.

One bill that the group supports would require county clerks of court to share the mental-health records of people not allowed to own guns with a federal background-check system. Federal law prohibits someone who has been involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital from owning a gun, but some states do not share those records with the federal database, in part because of privacy concerns.

N.C. Attorney General Roy Cooper asked legislators yesterday to pass the law, saying that it is one of several recommendations that a campus-safety study committee made in January.

At Wake Forest University, the carillon chimed 32 times at noon ,and a banner bearing a black ribbon and maroon "VT" was hanging between the columns of Wait Chapel.

Billy Brown, an art student, projected the Virginia Tech ribbon onto the chapel last night and Tuesday night.

Brown said that the idea was to make a Wake Forest landmark appear like a building at Virginia Tech.

One of the victims in the shootings was Kevin Granata, a biomedical engineering professor who taught graduate students at Wake Forest, mainly by video conference, as part of a program run by the two universities.

Tom Hughes, the president of the Triad chapter of the Virginia Tech Alumni Association, said that his group decided to encourage people to commemorate the shootings but not to hold a formal activity.

"I guess I'd like it for people to treat the anniversary their own way," he said.

The group also has been encouraging people to attend a talk on April 27 at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro by Nikki Giovanni, a professor who raised concerns about Cho's writing in her English class. Giovanni's rousing speech after the Virginia Tech shootings led to a rallying cry: "We are Virginia Tech."

The shootings at Virginia Tech drastically changed the work of campus police departments in preparing for worst-case scenarios, said Willie Bell, the chief of WSSU's police department.

The police department regularly works on plans for dealing with threats and hopes to buy a siren system in the next few months that also can play recorded messages.

"You don't want to come up short when something goes down," he said.

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