

StThomasPARENT

*Division of Student Affairs at the University of St. Thomas
Special Edition*

April 18, 2007

Dear Parents and Families,

Please know that your students are very important to us and that we take our role very seriously in striving to provide a safe and healthy campus for your students. In the wake of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) shootings Monday, University of St. Thomas administrators met to review university crisis response procedures and plan ecumenical prayer services.

“The University of St. Thomas community today joins a country in shock over the unspeakable horror that took place yesterday at Virginia Tech,” Father Dennis Dease, president of St. Thomas, said Tuesday. “I ask our community to join with me as we remember in our thoughts and prayers the victims, their families and friends, classmates and colleagues.”

University prayer service to be held

All members of the St. Thomas community have been invited to attend an ecumenical prayer service for victims of the Virginia Tech tragedy that will be at 4 p.m. Thursday, April 19, outdoors on the lower quadrangle of the St. Paul campus. The service will last about 15 minutes. The bells will toll throughout the service. The U.S. flag on the lower quadrangle will fly at half-staff throughout the week until sunset on Sunday, April 22. A second prayer service will be held at 12:30 p.m. Friday, April 20, in the chapel of the School of Law on the university’s Minneapolis campus.

How St. Thomas responds to major emergencies

St. Thomas administrators received calls this week from students and parents asking if the university has plans in place to deal with a similar crisis. Dan Meuwissen, director of Public Safety, explained that the university has plans that outline actions and responses to emergencies that could occur on campus. In addition, St. Thomas has a Crisis Response Team that is called upon in times of emergency. The team is made up of senior administrators who are authorized to make decisions and respond quickly.

Dealing with the tragedy

“Our students and members of this community are, to varying degrees, in the midst of dealing with this immense tragedy,” said Jeri Rockett, the university’s director of Personal Counseling and Testing.

Dr. Rockett offered some thoughts and suggestions that would be helpful for parents as they support their students in dealing with the tragedy:

- A crisis situation is one in which a student's typical coping responses don't work or may be less effective than usual.
- A student's response to a crisis is very individualized. We must be careful not to judge another's response, especially if it's different from our own.
- The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors experienced by students may be in response to the event at hand as well as previous (and potentially unresolved) events from the past.
- A sense of anxiety and panic could be absolutely predictable in response to recent events. There is so much we do not know; trying to find answers to explain such a tragedy is normal. Without available explanations, the attempt to find answers may take on a flavor of desperation and seem frantic in nature. We can help by allowing students to identify and discharge all the questions, fears, and uncertainties going through their heads. It is important to validate the concerns rather than talk students out of them. In crisis situations some students may not respond in their typical, rational way.
- The university has excellent resources available on campus for your students. These include Personal Counseling and Testing, Student Health Services, residence hall advisors, and Campus Ministry as well as faculty and staff.
- It is often helpful for people to just be with one another during times of crises. Saying the "right" words isn't the most important thing; feeling connected to people close to you is more important. Your students may be contacting you about non-specific issues when they really just want to have the opportunity to connect with you and "hear your voice".

Students who would like support or assistance in dealing with the tragedies are welcome to contact Personal Counseling, (651) 962-6780 or Campus Ministry, (651) 962-6560. "We'll have staff members available at Personal Counseling throughout the rest of the week and beyond for any student who would like to discuss any of their concerns with a trained counselor," Dr. Rockett said.

She also recommended a new Web site prepared by the American Psychological Association that gives advice on managing distress in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings. The Web site is <http://helping.apa.org/articles/article.php?id=151> .

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or desire additional information.

Sincerely,

Jane W. Canney
Vice President for Student Affairs
University of St. Thomas
Mail #4045
2115 Summit Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55105
651.962.6120 telephone
651.962.6024 facsimile