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Students, city try to mend fences

Duke lacrosse rape case spurs neighbors to reach out as students do the same

By ANNE BLYTHE, Staff Writer

Egos were bruised at Duke University last spring when the lacrosse team party with strippers, under-age drinking, boorish behavior and rape allegations cast a disparaging shadow over the whole campus.

Hordes of national TV, newspaper and magazine reporters flooded Duke and Durham.

In Rolling Stone magazine and other publications with global audiences, the students saw themselves portrayed as a bunch of snobbish, hard-drinking bed-hoppers.

"It just became this caricature of the institution," said Elliott Wolf, Duke's student body president since April. "I'm watching all of this and saying, 'This isn't me they're talking about.' I recognize some elements of it in the Duke culture, but we're such a diverse group."

Through the summer, Wolf and Daniel Bowes, the new student government community liaison, set out trying to change the sweeping characterization.

They started in Trinity Park, the neighborhood just beyond the stone walls rimming East Campus where raucous off-campus parties have created a grinding friction between students and their neighbors.

Their theory is that if students get to know their neighbors, they might think twice about tossing beers cans in yards and blasting music at 2 a.m.

Bowes, who will be one of the Duke students living in Trinity Park this year, has been to neighborhood association meetings. He went to four neighborhood Fourth of July parties and attended the Beaver Festival in the Duke Park neighborhood.

"We don't have any illusions that this is going to solve all the problems," Bowes said.

But they hope to gradually change the culture.

Duke freshmen are scheduled to move into campus residence halls on Aug. 22. Trinity Park residents are making baskets for the students to welcome them to Durham and give them an early taste of the community life beyond campus walls.

Last year, some of the near-campus neighbors invited students over, a few at a time, for a home-cooked meal.

This year, Duke is giving all freshmen a \$50 card to spend at businesses and restaurants on or near Ninth Street.

Other activities are scheduled to get the new students out in the community more.

* On Aug. 24, buses will shuttle students from campus to a Durham Bulls game and restaurants in the American Tobacco complex across the street from the ballpark.

* Theme-tours of the city are set for the first weekend. Students will have an opportunity to learn about community-service projects then, too.

This year, Yvonne Pena of the Durham Human Relations Commission rounded up students from Duke and N.C. Central University to help plan a unity event in October so students and others can discuss race, stereotypes and some of the other issues that arose from the lacrosse case.

"It's a way of saying, 'Let's work together,' " Pena said.

Bowes met regularly with N.C. Central student leaders throughout the summer and plans to continue the tradition during the school year.

"It's kind of interesting that NCCU is so close to us and a lot of our student body doesn't know it exists," Bowes said.

With the return of students for a new semester, Bowes and Wolf both expect heightened scrutiny. "When we come back, you know every little incident's going to be under the microscope," Wolf said.

While under that microscope, the student leaders say they hope that hard-working, community-spirited students are noticed, too.

"We live in Durham," Wolf said. "We're all residents of Durham. ... There's this idea of the Duke bubble. That doesn't just hurt us, it hurts the community, too."

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