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Students find community is not as safe as it seems

By Lyndsey Sage
THE BATTALION

Late one night, Emily Conner, a sophomore journalism major, and a friend were returning home from a get together. They were seated in their car waiting at a red light in Waco. When the light turned green, the car directly across from them pulled into the middle of the intersection to block traffic. A large man, armed with a gun, approached the cars behind him in a robbery attempt. In a split second, Conner and her friend were forced to make a decision.

"We went in reverse down the road and called 911," Conner said.

Amidst the warm greetings of "howdy" and the welcoming smiles of the surrounding community, most people think "it won't happen to me," Statistics show, however, that 1 in 4 people will be in a situation where they are the victim of a crime.

"It changed my perspective on feeling safe," Conner said.

Indeed, for most students, it is not until after they are directly involved with crime that they become aware of the evil that lurks in the world.

Although ranked as the safest college campus in the nation by the FBI, the A&M campus is not exempt from crime. Lt. Bert Kretzschmar of the University Police Department said crime occurs on campus everyday.

"It is still open and anyone can walk onto campus," Kretzschmar said. "A&M is a city in itself, so things do happen. The most prevalent crime is theft. Misdemeanor stats from September 2000 to August 2001 report that the value of the property that was lost was \$549,000; that includes A&M and personal property."

Kretzschmar explained that the majority of thefts fall into the category "crimes of opportunity." Examples of these crimes occur when people leave their car door unlocked or a backpack unattended, allowing the thief easy access. By the time everything in a backpack is totaled, including books, calculators, wallets, cell phones, palm pilots and checkbooks, it is estimated a backpack can be worth more than \$1,000. Kretzschmar recalled a case where someone's backpack was stolen that contained two years of research.

Ty Keeling, a junior agricultural development major, had more than his backpack stolen. His truck was stolen from a student resident lot his freshman year. He parked it on a Sunday about two weeks into school and went back early Thursday of that same week to discover it was not there.

"I rode around with the cop for two to three hours and he kept telling me I had misplaced it," Keeling said.

When the truck was never discovered Keeling filed a police report. On his way home during Christmas break, nearly three months later, Keeling received a phone call from the police

saying his truck had been found in Navasota. "It was a routine disturbance call, the police noticed the window and the column above the steering wheel were knocked out and the license plate didn't match the registration."

"I pretty much lived in my truck since I was a fish. They took everything out of it, but I was paid for all of it," Keeling said.

The incident, however, did not change Keeling's perception of safety on campus.

"You obviously don't want your stuff stolen. I'm an acceptor of what happens," Keeling said. "I still think [A&M] is an extremely safe place."

To retrieve stolen property, it must be identified as belonging to the owner. Kretzschmar advised students to mark or engrave property, their driver's licenses, as opposed to their security number, and keep a list of the numbers from their belongings.

Kretzschmar said students should be aware of their environment.

"A lot of situations could have been avoided had people been paying more attention of the surroundings," Kretzschmar said. "Know who is going and what you are doing."

While the greater part of crime on campus includes theft and liquor violations, there have been circumstances from time to time of serious cases.

"There was a serial killer on campus a few years ago and an attempted murder in the Kretzschmar recalled. "Recently, the most case has been the Don Davis case. [Davis] was a serial rapist on campus a few years ago. Since then, though, Davis has been captured."

Kretzschmar said students should be aware of on and off campus. Amy Stair, a sophomore elementary education major, was awakened to the reality of crime when she came home one night.

"When I came home there was a trail of blood from the parking lot to the hallway by my apartment building," Stair said. "There had been a fight the night before. One guy pulled a knife and stabbed the other one. It made news the next day. It was because I always took for granted that I lived in a place that was safe from these kind of incidents."

According to the College Station Police Department crime statistics from January to December 2001, 23 percent of all crimes reported were major offenses, including murder, rape, robbery, theft, burglary and assault. Vehicle theft is the most common crime.

Students should be sure their doors and windows are always locked, when they are and when they are home. Also, they should be aware of door-to-door salesmen and never let strangers into their homes, regardless of what they say or their appearance. The most effective thing one can do to protect against becoming a victim is to be informed and aware of their surroundings.

"I am definitely more conscious of what is going on around me," Stair said.

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