

The Times

Dean pleads not guilty in hazing death

3 more defendants await court hearings in Rider case

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BY DARRYL R. ISHERWOOD

TRENTON -- Rider University Dean of Students Anthony Campbell pleaded not guilty yesterday to charges of aggravated hazing in the alcohol poisoning death of freshman Gary DeVercelly, who died after a fraternity initiation ritual last March.

A popular and influential administrator at the Lawrence Township-based university, Campbell said nothing as attorney Rocco C. Cipparone Jr. entered the plea. Campbell, 51, of Lawrence, was released without bail.

Campbell and Director of Greek Life Ada Badgley, who also was indicted Friday, are thought to be the only administrators in the country ever charged in connection with a hazing death. Several attorneys have said the case could be a watershed event for college administrators throughout the nation.

The pair were indicted along with three students, fraternity president Michael J. Torney, 21, pledge master Dominic Olsen, 21, and house manager Adriano DiDonato, 22. All are officers in the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity where DeVercelly was a pledge.

If convicted of the fourth-degree felony, the five face up to 18 months in jail along with a \$10,000 fine.

Yesterday, Cipparone said he was confident of his client's innocence.

"I'm not aware of anything he has done or anything he omitted to do that would make him guilty of anything," he said. "He was home asleep in his bed. He didn't sanction (the party), didn't commission it and didn't approve it. I expect at the end of the process we will see the full exoneration of Dr. Campbell."

The charges stem from a fraternity party held late March 28 into the early hours of March 29. DeVercelly, an 18-year-old Long Beach, Calif., native, was a pledge in the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity. As part of his initiation, DeVercelly was taking part in a "Big Little Night" where he was drinking the "family drink" -- Absolut Vodka -- with his fraternity big brother.

DeVercelly allegedly drank more than half of the bottle of vodka in a short period of time. Sometime after 1 a.m. on March 29, DeVercelly lost consciousness. Nearly an hour later, his friends called paramedics who rushed DeVercelly to a Trenton trauma center, where he died March 30. An autopsy revealed a blood alcohol content of 0.426.

DiDonato, of Princeton, pleaded not guilty on Wednesday and Torney, who is from Randolph, is expected to be arraigned today. Olsen, who lives in Kenilworth, and Badgley are expected to be arraigned sometime next week.

Cipparone said he does not intend to seek pre-trial intervention -- a court-sponsored program that would allow the charges to be dismissed after a period of time -- adding that he hopes to see the charges against Campbell dropped by the judge or by Mercer County Prosecutor Joseph Bocchini.

"(PTI) is not in our game plan at this time unless I see some evidence that convinces me differently, but I would be shocked if that happened," he said.

After Campbell's indictment, attorney G. Robert Wills, a Princeton lawyer who often defends educators in criminal cases, said it would likely be a tough case for the prosecution to prove.

"I think the prosecution is going to have a difficult time showing the requisite criminal intent," Wills said. "But they may be able to show such gross negligence it amounted to reckless indifference."

Campbell stood quietly with Cipparone as the attorney responded to reporters gathered outside the courthouse. Cipparone said he had instructed the Rider administrator not to answer questions.

The attorney said Campbell was touched by the outpouring of support from alumni and students, parents and administrators, many of whom had written, called and visited in the days since the indictment.

On Saturday Rider graduate Cathleen Ziegler started a group on www.facebook.com in support of Campbell and Badgley. To date there are more than 1,300 members in the group.

"He's been buoyed by the outpouring of support both privately and publicly he has received," Cipparone said.

Though university students had discussed holding a protest in support of Campbell, few were present at the arraignment. Olivia Tattory, executive editor of the Rider Newspaper, was on hand to cover the proceeding and support Campbell.

"I don't think he had anything to do with this party," Tattory said. "I don't think he knew what was going on."

Tattory described Campbell as a "very caring dean" and a "great person."

"The students are not just another face with him," she said.

A university employee described Campbell yesterday as an "incredible human being," saying the dean had been integral to the school's rise in prominence over the past eight years. Several university programs, including a cooperative education program and a center for leadership development, are a result of Campbell's work.

"When I think of Tony's contribution I think of service to Rider, to the students and staff and to the community," said Jan Friedman-Krupnick, who works for Campbell as assistant vice president for student affairs. Friedman-Krupnick cited several instances of Campbell's passion for his job and for the students.

"A few years ago a student's house burned down and not only did he provide emotional support, he also collected money to help the student buy books, because Tony didn't want his education to be interrupted," she said.

Anne Buchanan, a spokeswoman for Rider, said yesterday school officials "continue to be surprised that two university officials were charged."

"Neither of them was at the party and to the best of our knowledge, neither engaged in the activities outlined in the prosecutor's press release of last week," she said.

Buchanan said both Campbell and Badgley remain active employees of the university. A further decision on the status of the two will be made next week.

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