

Women's groups worry about lack of assault leads

By PAULA K. KNUDSEN
Collegian Staff Writer

A lack of new leads on a suspect who police believe is responsible for attacks on women in May has area rape activists worried about the safety of unsuspecting students.

Pam Shea, community education coordinator for the Women's Resource Center, 140 W. Nittany Ave., said many students are unaware of the attacks that occurred last spring when two women were attacked in separate incidents.

Patty Johnstone, assistant director of the Center for Women Students, agreed that first-year students at the University are especially prone to feeling nothing can happen to them.

"New students come here feeling very safe," Johnstone said. "I think

it's the feeling always that this is Happy Valley and crime doesn't happen here."

Tom Jordan, criminal investigator for the State College Police Department, said police suspect the two attacks were made by the same man — a tall, thin, white man in his 20s with dark hair. Jordan said the belief that there is only one suspect is based on the location of the attacks and similar things that were said and done in each case.

Police do not know if the man responsible for the attacks was just passing through town or if he is an area resident or possibly a student, Jordan said.

The first attack occurred sometime after 11 p.m. on May 5 at Fairmount Avenue Park, when a woman was walking alone and attacked from behind by a white

man. The assault was interrupted by a State College police officer who shined a light into the park, noticed feet and got out of her cruiser to investigate, Jordan said. As the officer walked toward the scene, she saw a man running away. Then she found a woman lying on the ground, gasping for air because she had been choked.

The second attack took place eight days later on the 900 block of South Pugh Street around 2:25 a.m. Once again, a woman was walking alone, and was grabbed from behind and assaulted. She crawled across the street after the attack and was found badly injured by two students who called the police, Jordan said.

The police, after working with the second victim, were able to create a sketch of the suspect. But even after various names were

supplied to the police and several photo lineups were run, police were unable to identify a suspect.

The investigation is still continuing but police have no new leads, Jordan said.

While the police continue their investigation, area activists are encouraging students to be aware of the possible danger and to change their nighttime walking patterns.

Students feel safe walking alone at night, Johnstone said, because they assume there are always other students out late. But that assumption can lead to a dangerous situation, she said.

"They need to follow common sense safety rules," she said.

Safety rules include someone who is walking informing friends what route she is taking so they know where she will be, walking

with groups of people, appearing confident and walking in well-lit areas.

But many students, even though they do not know much about the attacks, are still not afraid to walk alone.

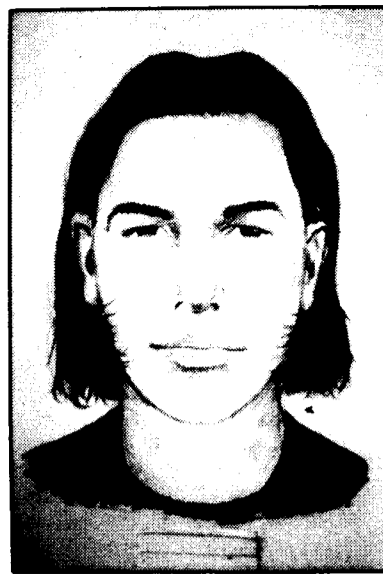
Chrissy Frederick, who runs by herself, admitted she does not know much about the attacks.

"I've heard a little bit about it," said Frederick (sophomore-biology). "But I don't know exactly what happened."

But Frederick said she is not afraid. "I've never felt threatened."

Even students who have heard of the attacks, such as Karen Czajkowski, said freshmen probably do not know about them.

"I bet new freshmen don't know about it," said Czajkowski (sophomore-business).



Courtesy of State College Police

This is a sketch of the man police believe committed two assaults last May. An investigation by State College police is continuing.

University, borough working to rid areas of inaccessibility

By MICHELLE ROACH
Collegian Staff Writer

Donald Smitley was immediately attracted by a Center for Performing Arts advertisement for "South of the Mountain," a performance to be held in the basement at the Veterans of Foreign Wars post, 139 N. Barnard St., last month.

The ad read "free and open to the public," so Smitley, who is an avid patron of the arts, figured he had nothing to lose. But when he got to the performance, Smitley discovered he did have something to lose — his dignity.

Smitley is disabled and must use a wheelchair. The VFW building is not wheelchair-accessible.

"They could have carried me in, but there's no dignity in that," he said. "Open to the public — they shouldn't have put that in (the ad)."

Peter Zimmerman, audience services director for the Center for Performing Arts, said the incident was the center's mistake.

The Center for Performing Arts is not the only organization admitting that there is a problem. Both the University and the State College Borough are trying to eliminate inaccessibility in the area. Officials are working to get the environment up to the standards dictated in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.

Although the incident at the VFW has since been resolved, Smitley said he does have some problems with a few areas on campus. He particularly dislikes sitting in the back during shows at Eisenhower Auditorium and sitting in the immediate front at shows at Schwab Auditorium, he said.

Zimmerman said he agrees with Smitley's grievances, but said the buildings' designs make it difficult to allow for more comfortable seating without violating fire codes. And creating additional disabled seating would require money from the University, he said.

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audience services director for the Center for Performing Arts

said. "Anyone who wants to get in to see a performance should be able to do it comfortably."

But not all disabled members in the community think front-row seating is bad. Tom Kleban (graduate-business) said he once attended a performance at the Playhouse Theatre and was glad he got to sit in the front.

Improved accessibility on campus has been a priority of the University's Office of Physical Plant.

Jim Lettiere, manager of space, planning and management for OPP, said during the past couple of years the University has

made several improvements concerning disabled accessibility including making curb cuts, adding elevators, posting signs, making rest rooms accessible and widening doors. But Lettiere said OPP still has a lot of work to do — anywhere from five to seven years worth — to label the University completely accessible.

Kleban, who has been attending the University for nine years, said the changes have been helpful. However, he said, when accessibility was not as good, he did not really notice because he would find his way around things. Kleban still takes the same attitude today.

"If there's not one way to do it, there's always another," he said.

Some of the remodeling over the last two years has been a direct result of a lawsuit filed by University students in the summer of 1993. The lawsuit, settled earlier this year out of court, alleged the University was not complying with standards laid out in the ADA, Lettiere said. Since then, OPP has been focusing on getting the buildings that were listed in the settlement up to standards, he said.

The University has requested \$20 million from the state and has set aside \$20 million of its annual budget solely for accessibility remodeling, Lettiere said.

The State College Borough is also working toward improving accessibility.

Lu Hoover, ADA issues committee chairwoman for the State College Planning Commission, said renovations of the Borough's Municipal Building and the Pugh Street Parking Garage have a combined cost of more than \$90,000. The committee has also budgeted \$85,000 in 1996 for renovations at area parks.

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