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Yale Applicant: 'You Can't Stop Going'

In The Aftermath Of A Tragedy

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Last week, Simi Parikh, a high school senior from Guilford, emerged smiling from Yale's admissions office. She had an interview and listened to an information session, and she was quite certain she would apply.

About a mile away, national and local media swarmed the university's medical school, awaiting the latest update on Annie Le, the graduate student whose body had been recovered inside a building wall.

But at the admissions office on peaceful, tree-lined Hillhouse Avenue, it was as if none of that was happening. During one information session, neither students nor their parents voiced a single concern about safety or the killing.

"I feel very sorry for her family and their loss, but it doesn't change my opinion of the institution," Parikh said as she left the admissions office. "These things can happen in some of the safest places. You can't stop going; you can't stop living."

Her mother, Sarla Parikh, said the death "raises a little bit of a red flag of concern ... but you cannot say that this is not something that could happen in the middle of anywhere. You can't say that Yale is not tight on safety."

If her daughter were to go to Yale, Sarla Parikh said, "I would not blink an eye."

The killing of Le, a graduate student in pharmacology, shined the sort of spotlight on Yale that no university wants. But it's doubtful the tragedy will have lasting negative effects, if interviews with prospective students, their parents, and experts on colleges are any measure.

The situation was quite different in 1991, following the death of Christian Prince, a sophomore and fourth generation Yale who was shot and killed not far from the university president's home.

Located in a city that had long struggled with crime, Yale had also grappled with the issue for years. But Prince's killing - apparently a random street crime - significantly damaged the public perception of safety at Yale. At the time, college applications were dropping everywhere, but at

Yale, the next year, they dropped by about 9.5 percent - a decline some attributed to fears that the campus had become dangerous.

But Prince's death also galvanized a massive university effort to improve security, expanding the police force, installing dozens of blue emergency lights and telephones on campus, expanding escort and shuttle services. Huge investments were also made in developing commerce and renovating real estate in the city.

In 1998, there was another homicide: Suzanne Jovin, a Yale senior, was found stabbed to death in a wealthy neighborhood near campus. Her thesis adviser was questioned in the case, which has not been solved.

Still, applications were unaffected and actually increased in the next year. Again the university focused on security. In recent years, lighting, emergency phones, and Yale police and security forces have been expanded and police visibility has increased.

During the past decade, the crime rate in New Haven fell, and, the rate has dropped on the Yale campus. A letter sent recently from Mary Miller, dean of the college, to parents said that crime on campus in 2008 was at its lowest level since 1985. Meanwhile, applications have soared, doubling in the past 10 years.

In an interview with the Yale Daily News before Le disappeared, Jeffrey Brenzel, dean of undergraduate admissions, said safety no longer seemed to be a matter of particular concern when considering Yale.

"When we look at students who are admitted to Yale and decide not to come, it used to be that security in New Haven was a major, major factor in the decision," Brenzel was quoted as saying in the Yale Daily News. "That is not the case today."

In an e-mail last week, Brenzel said admissions office staff members have been fielding questions on Le's death, "but [the questions] seem more focused on the details of the case itself than on safety in New Haven."

Most of the college counselors and other experts on colleges cite several reasons they don't expect the college's popularity or reputation to suffer.

For example, Le's killing is strikingly different from Prince's, which appeared to be a random homicide, and from Jovin's, which continues to be an unsolved, open case. Le appears to have been targeted. Raymond Clark III, a laboratory technician with whom she worked, was arrested last week and charged with murder.

Janet Rosier, an independent college consultant from Woodbridge, said that because Le appeared to be targeted, "I don't think parents will look at their own child and think that could happen to their children. ... If someone had broken into a dorm, that would be a different story. That is the kind of story that really makes parents think twice about a college."

In addition, Rosier said, "Yale was really on top of this immediately," communicating with students, faculty and the public.

In a letter to the university community last week, Yale President Richard Levin wrote that the killing "could have happened in any city, in any university, or in any workplace. It says more about the dark side of the human soul than it does about the extent of security measures."

Michelle Hernandez, a college consultant and author of "A is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting into the Ivy League and other Top Colleges," said that two of her student clients are applying to Yale and neither has mentioned any concerns about the recent killing. Given the apparently isolated and targeted nature of Le's death, Hernandez said, she doesn't think it will prompt safety concerns for parents about Yale. "They just want their kid to go there, no matter what."

But not every college consultant dismissed the idea that the situation could cause problems for Yale.

Cristiana M. Quinn, a Providence college adviser, said she's already had a family call to ask whether her student clients at Yale feel safe; Quinn says they do.

"It tends to be more the parents of girls than boys" who will become concerned, Quinn said. Because Yale is such a sought-after college, she expects any effect will be slight.

Another college consultant, Steven Roy Goodman of Washington, D.C., said his clients often voice concerns about safety at Yale and he thinks the university needs to do better at addressing security issues in general. Le's death leaves parents "more concerned than they were," he said, but so far those parents are still allowing their children to apply to Yale this year.

Experts also point to other colleges and universities that endured tragedies but have survived with very little image damage and no effect on the numbers of applications.

When 32 people were killed at Virginia Tech in April 2007, during the month when accepted students decide whether they will come, college officials were surprised to find that the percentage of accepted students who agreed to come went up. The university went on to overshoot its enrollment targets for that fall and the next.

In 2003, an alumnus of Case Western Reserve University entered a school of management building firing shots, killing one student and wounding others. George Sopko, vice president for Stanton Public Relations in New York, who worked with the university in the aftermath, said applications to the school did not drop.

"People realized that this was isolated, that it had nothing to do with security," Sopko said. "It was sort of a fluke."

He said the same thing appears to be true in Le's slaying at Yale.

At Wesleyan University where Johanna Justin-Jinich was shot and killed by an apparent stalker in May in a bookstore near campus, spokesman David Pesci said he has not heard of any lingering fears or worries among perspective students or their parents. At freshman orientation, he said, parents were focused on swine flu.

So what might Yale expect in the coming admissions cycle?

Brenzel, dean of admissions, said in an e-mail, "I learned not to make predictions about application counts or what might cause fluctuations. There are just too many variables at work."