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Strangers walk into Tingelstad rooms

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Mast news reporter

Two women entered several unlocked rooms at Tingelstad residence hall between 8 and 9:30 a.m. March 7, and took residents' personal belongings.

When exactly the break-ins happened "is a matter of debate right now," said Walt Huston, Campus Safety Director.

The women wandered the halls and looked for unlocked and unoccupied rooms.

They took easily transportable items — checks, cash cards, credit cards, telephone cards, CDs, gas cards, gift certificates, car keys, social security cards, cash — things that could fit, without calling much attention, into the large purses they were carrying.

There are no suspects and Campus Safety has some vague descriptions.

"Nothing very useful. Average height, a little on the heavy side, large purses, both white, one a little taller than the other," said Huston.

The women looked to be between the ages of 26 and early 30s and were described as being dressed "trashily."

Freshman Amanda Carpenter, a Tingelstad resident who had a run-in with the two women, added that they both had mullets.

Pierce County Sheriff's Department has opened several cases assigning different case numbers to each individual victim. All cards reported stolen have been cancelled and the perpetrators in case they try to use any of them.

In addition to Campus Safety and the sheriff's department, Tingelstad's RD John Paul also spoke with some of the students whose rooms were entered.

His immediate response was to write up a sign, now on the front door of the hall, reminding students to lock their doors, report incidents immediately and alert Campus Safety or their RA of strangers in the hallway.

Paul recognizes the importance of educating students on such issues and is considering community meetings within Tingelstad about the incident. Paul stressed that the residence hall is a community and students should look out for strangers.

The two perpetrators entered Tingelstad early in the morning, while there was still no front deskworker, "which means someone must have let them in," said Huston.

Paul explained that the security of their rooms is students' responsibility and Residential Life does not have liability but rather responsibility for the building's security. Paul added that while the front deskworkers are not officially security, they are "the first line of defense" and are trained to notice people, and alert Campus Safety in suspicious situations.

The front deskworker saw the two women leaving.

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According to Paul, the judgment the deskworker made in this case was a reasonable one since they had not seen the women enter the building. Another witness is a PLU student who saw them in the pool at around 9:30 a.m.

The burglaries were first reported a few hours later — at 11:09 a.m.

"It is totally baffling to me why it took so long," Huston said, "especially when one of the victims caught these people in their room."

Carpenter was one of the students who saw the two women. At 8:55 a.m., Carpenter came back to her room after taking a shower and found one of the women in the hallway and the other one inside her room. They apologized and said they were looking for a different Amanda, made some small talk and left.

Immediately after that, Carpenter went to her RA but she was not in her room. Then Carpenter shared her encounter with a friend whose wallet turned out to be missing.

She then had to go to her first class, but afterwards, Carpenter spoke with her RA and reported her conversation with the strangers to Campus Safety, which already had several reports of missing personal items.

At the time she thought the strangers entering her room was weird, but nothing was missing, and she presumed they might indeed be looking for an Amanda. Later she was glad to have walked in on time, before they had a chance to take her wallet.

By Monday reports had been made for four rooms which had been entered, and a fifth report was filed that morning.

Many of the students whose rooms were entered had left their room open while taking a morning shower. Huston urged students not to assume that they will only be gone for a minute and everything will be fine.

He emphasized the importance of locking one's room, car, not leaving belongings in plain sight and not to let people they do not know in the halls when the front door is locked.

Huston added: "the days of leaving your house unlocked passed a long time ago ... unfortunate, but true."