

After Campus Murder, InterVarsity Chapter Ministers Life to Student Body

The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter at the University of Illinois is reeling from tragedy this week.

A Chinese doctoral student at the University of Illinois remains jailed on \$10 million bond as of Saturday, accused of killing his ex-girlfriend, say police. According to the Urbana Police Department, 29-year-old Yongfei Ci is accused of breaking into the apartment of 25-year-old Mengchen Huang on Friday morning. He tied up her roommate and put her in the bathroom but kept Huang in the living room. Police say the roommate escaped unharmed and called for help.

The assistant Champaign County state's attorney's office notes that Ci, believing Huang was cheating on him, had driven in from Rhode Island to confront her. The confrontation turned violent, and Ci is accused of stabbing Huang three times before killing her.

Huang was a foreign national student from China and was involved with International Christian Fellowship, the international arm of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a student campus ministry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Greg Jao, InterVarsity's national field director, shares a small comfort, despite the tragic circumstance. "I'm so grateful that student was involved in a Christian fellowship and was being introduced to the gospel and engaged by it," he says.

At the International Christian Fellowship, the group builds friendships with international students, scholars, postdocs and their families. They welcome anyone to attend their family group Bible studies, family reunion worship gatherings, social events and conferences.

The brutality and personal nature of Huang's death added to the burden her friends are trying to cope with. Jao says due to the number of college campus shootings in the last decade, leaders already had training to deal with trauma and crisis.

"Our goal there, obviously, is to provide immediate pastoral care, connect them to counseling and provide the kinds of resources that you need in that community: alternative housing, connections for food and clothing—whatever's necessary at the time," he says.

However, Jao is quick to note that nothing prepares a group of friends for something as brutal as murder. The question of impact on the student body, the people who were closest to Huang and her church body shapes their response.

"We're working with the broader fellowship to address a number of questions: How do you understand the reality of evil? How do you create ample space for grief and for questions to emerge?" Jao says.

What they don't want to do, he says, is short-circuit the process by providing easy answers.

"Part of what we're hoping to do with the fellowship is appropriately—but in a reasonable amount of time—bring them back to the reality of the gospel and the message of hope we offer the broader campus," he says.

Jao adds that whenever a school loses a member of the campus population, it ripples out. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship will stand ready to answer not only its own group members' questions but also those that inevitably come from the general

campus population.

“It provokes people to ask questions about their safety, about identity, about their life direction, meaning and purpose,” he says.

Jao acknowledges that engaging in meaningful conversation about these issues is a challenge when people are scared or in pain.

“How do we speak truthful words of hope that don’t minimize the pain and the suffering that people are actually experiencing, but also point to a larger hope that we have?” he says.

While he’s thankful for having received earlier training, Jao says the grieving process will be hard. Please pray with them.

“Our staff on the ground needs a lot of wisdom as they’re working through pastoral care issues but also mobilizing people toward mission,” he says. “The student leaders need to be able to have space to grieve and to mourn, as well as to be the witness that they need to be on campus and [to] people most closely involved with that close friendship network that that student had.”

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