

Lee University Student Charged With 'Commission of Act of Terrorism'

A student from Church of God's Lee University was arrested this week after posting an anonymous shooting threat toward the Tennessee college on social media.

Sophomore Olayinka Opasso, an 18-year-old Nigerian student, was charged with commission of an act of terrorism by the Cleveland Police Department after confessing to posting the threat to a senior Lee University official.

Commission of an act of terrorism is a Class-A felony and is punishable by up to 25 years in prison for a first offense in the state of Tennessee.

Lee University Campus Safety Director Matt Brinkman took Opasso into custody before transporting him to the Cleveland Police Department, where he was interviewed by local investigators.

Brinkman said that Lee placed heightened security on campus from both Campus Safety and the Cleveland Police Department after the threat was brought to the university's attention.

"We had police personnel present [on campus and at campus events] to ensure safety, to let students know that we were taking it seriously and to calm them," Brinkman said.

The threat was made on Yik Yak, a mobile messaging app that allows users to post anonymous text posts called "yaks" to other "yakkers" within a 5-mile radius.

Brinkman said a student took a screenshot of the post and emailed it to his office on Oct. 9. Lee administration then contacted local authorities, who in turn contacted the FBI.

"Our primary goal was to [ensure] the safety of students, so we were looking into the validity of [the threat] and immediately went into investigation with the police department to see what we could find out and go from there," Brinkman said.

Students were not notified of the threat at that time, and class schedules continued as normal.

The Christian university was thrown into the media spotlight on Oct. 13, however, when word of the threat began circulating on Facebook among Lee students. Parents and students began calling the school and local authorities for more information, prompting Lee University President Paul Conn to give an official statement.

"While the post is indeed anonymous and there is no direct evidence of its credibility, we do want you to know that we are taking precautions to maintain our safe campus environment," Conn said.

The statement was sent to students and staff via email and was posted on Lee's website.

Conn's announcement outlined Lee's cooperation with the FBI and local law enforcement to identify the source of the anonymous threat and provided guidelines on how to respond to an active shooting on campus.

"We understand why people would feel uneasy about posts like this," Conn said. "It is part of the chaotic and often unsettling world we live in. However, based on all available information in consultation with authorities, we do not feel it is necessary to suspend normal activity at this time. We encourage everyone to continue to engage in the life of campus as usual."

While administration made the decision not to cancel classes, professors did allow avenues of precaution for students.

"I've encouraged faculty to be sensitive and generous," Vice President for Academic Affairs Deborah Murray said, advising faculty not to penalize students for choosing not to attend class.

Opaso's threat surfaced only eight days after the Umpqua Community College shooting in Roseburg, Oregon, and followed a shooting at Northern Arizona University that occurred the same day.

Some Lee students chose to leave campus following the threat, either travelling home or staying in hotel rooms in town purchased for them by their parents.

Still, the majority of students remained on campus, and felt that Lee responded to the situation appropriately.

"I felt that the situation was handled in the best and most logical way that it could have been," junior Rachel Hess said. "Situations like this call for sound reasoning, not rash action. I think the administration took all the precautions they needed to and I did not feel that I was in danger walking to classes."

Hess said that even when it became clear that the incident was not a hoax, she did not feel unsafe, and instead trusted that God would use her for a purpose no matter what happened.

"I very much feel that we need to be logical and carefully consider threats like this when they happen," Hess said. "But I also believe that there's a lot of trust involved in our relationship with God as Christians. (That) was a day to rely very heavily on that."

The investigation of the incident is ongoing, and Brinkman said Lee will continue to assist local authorities and the FBI throughout that process.