

Campus Horror

DeKALB - Northern Illinois University students and staff are shocked and looking for answers after a lone gunman killed five students and wounded 16 others Thursday before shooting himself.

Shortly after 3 p.m., a man dressed in black entered an auditorium in Cole Hall and began firing a shotgun at students toward the end of a geology class, according to university officials and eyewitness accounts.

Three victims and the gunman died at the scene, and two others later died: one at Kishwaukee Community Hospital in DeKalb and the other at OSF Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford, NIU President John Peters said.

Peters did not reveal the identities of the victims late Thursday, pending notification of families, but said four of the victims were women. One of the dead has been identified as Dan Parmenter, a sophomore from Westchester and a staff member of the NIU school newspaper, an adviser for the paper said Thursday night.

“He was a wonderful young man, just very nice, very easy to work with. (He was) somebody who was part of our family,” said Maria Krull, business adviser for the Northern Star newspaper.

What is known about the gunman late Thursday is that he was an NIU sociology graduate student in spring 2007, said Peters, who added that the gunman apparently has no police record and there was no known motive for the shootings as of Thursday evening. Peters also said the gunman was currently enrolled at another school.

Peters described the rampage as a “very brief, rapid-fire assault.” University Police Chief Don Grady, who said the assault lasted “seconds,” said the gunman was armed with a shotgun and two handguns. Grady and witnesses said the gunman entered through a side door on a stage near where the instructor was lecturing and began shooting once he passed a screen on the stage in the front of the classroom.

Before the gunman started shooting, NIU senior John Leparte said, he and others thought the man's actions were a joke.

“He went through the door on the stage, and just started firing,” Leparte said. “He was still on the stage firing as we rushed out.”

Senior Desiree Smith, who had splashes of someone else's blood on her jeans, estimated about 120 students were in the auditorium at the time. Peters said 162 students are registered for the course.

“I was sitting there – we had 10 minutes left of class – taking notes,” Smith said. “All of a sudden, I see this man out of the corner of my eye. He just seemed to appear. He was dressed all in black, he had a black ski cap on, and I saw him shoot.”

Fleeing students, some injured in the attack, took shelter in nearby university buildings. Within minutes of the attack, officials began locking down the university and urging people through phone calls, e-mails and the Internet to take cover. Police responded within minutes, Grady said. The teacher, a graduate assistant, was shot in the attack, Peters said, but is expected to recover.

Chante Hill, a 24-year-old psychology major from Chicago, had just sat down with her faculty adviser in nearby Zulauf Hall when he got the call and locked the door. Through the adviser's second-floor window, they watched students run away and policemen with rifles advance on Cole Hall.

Hill said she could not express the sorrow she felt for the victims, their families and the university.

“It makes my stomach hurt. It's an overwhelming feeling,” Hill said. “It hurts. It hurts.”

Peters said classes and activities at all NIU campuses are canceled until further notice. Officials also pleaded with students to contact their parents and let them know they were all right.

Four victims were in critical condition late Thursday, three of whom were airlifted to other regional hospitals, KishHealth System President and CEO Kevin Poorten said.

The one confirmed death, Dan Parmenter, had worked with the newspaper for about a year as an advertising sales representative, Krull said. He was a member of a fraternity and had been considering a major in finance, she said.

“He was just like a teddy bear, always willing to help others. (He was) a kid you want to have for your own. I just can't believe I'm not going to see him anymore,” she added.

Thursday's attack comes about two months after the university postponed December final exams in response to graffiti in a dormitory bathroom vaguely threatening violence and making reference to the April 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech.

Both Peters and Grady said late Thursday that the gunman's motives are unknown, and they do not believe the graffiti and the shooting are related. The FBI is assisting in the investigation.

The shooting frightened anthropology associate professor Kendall Thu, who had taught a class in the same auditorium three hours earlier. He has kept the possibility of such violence in the back of his mind – he attended graduate school at the University of Iowa when a gunman killed five people. But Thu said it's still hard to expect such a tragedy.

“It's one thing to write graffiti on a bathroom wall,” Thu said. “It's another to stand up on a stage gunning people down.”

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