

Harvard Officials Stress the Positive Despite the Most Recent Events in a Year of Trials

By WILLIAM H. HONAN

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., May 30 — When Neil Rudenstine, the president of Harvard University, took an unscheduled leave of absence last winter, suffering from the stresses of his job, he received 1,500 get-well cards from faculty and students.

"A lot of them said, 'I need a break too,'" Mr. Rudenstine recalled during an interview in his office today. "Can I join you in the Caribbean?"

Mr. Rudenstine could be jovial until Sunday, when Sinedu Tadesse, a 20-year-old junior from Ethiopia, fatally stabbed her roommate and fellow pre-med major, Trang Phuong Ho, in their dormitory room and then hanged herself.

The deaths have prompted not only horror but also wonder at what could have led to the worst act of violence in memory at the nation's premier university. All the worse, the murder-suicide follows several unwelcome episodes in what has proved to be a remarkably rocky school year: two earlier student suicides, the university's decision not to admit Gina Grant once it found that years earlier she had killed her mother in South Carolina, and an

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incidents involving a Harvard medical school professor that has brought embarrassment to the campus.

In his office today, Mr. Rudenstine, looking trim and tan, called Sunday's fatal violence "a terrible human thing" but said it should not diminish Harvard's "positive and dynamic" accomplishments during the academic year, which ends with graduation next week.

"This has been one of our best years in who gets in and who comes out," he said, citing a sharp rise in applicants, including almost twice the number of high school valedictorians as five years ago.

He also noted that the university raised \$300 million this year. "We couldn't raise that kind of money if Harvard were in trouble," he said.

Dr. Robert Coles, a Harvard pro-

fessor of psychiatry, also urged that the recent troubles be seen in isolation, not as part of some broad difficulty.

"I put in a plea for the way great novelists like Dickens or Tolstoy would see this tragedy: as a matter of fate and chance," he said. "I would not connect them to a larger story about Harvard."

As for the effect of the murder-suicide, Professor Coles said: "It does shock the students. But these students are achievers, and they go on. There's no panic, no evidence of group despair, no mass hysteria."

Albert Carnesale, provost of the university, said of the incident: "That says more about what makes the news than this university. It's clear that this university is doing quite well, although this tragedy is not part of the 'doing quite well.'"

Turning to earlier difficulties, Mr. Carnesale said: "In the Gina Grant case, people have been saying, 'What a wise decision that was!' My guess is that more people would be saying that today than a week ago."

"The same with Neil's leave," he continued. "Many people said what a courageous thing it was for him to do."

As for the case of **John Mack**, the Harvard psychiatrist who wrote a best seller on abductions by space creatures and whose professional ethics have been questioned by a committee of his peers, Mr. Carnesale said, "Not one person has raised that with me as having anything to do with Harvard."

In the aftermath of Sunday's deaths, the university's crisis intervention teams were called in and have been concentrating on the students who knew the two dead young women, said Fred Jewett, dean of Harvard College, who, like the other officials, cautioned against drawing broad inferences from the university's unsettling year.

He observed that Harvard's graduation rate of 97 percent was, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the highest in the nation. "That speaks to the kinds of success students are having here," he said.

As for the student stress that is legend at Harvard, Bill Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid, said much of it was myth. "They used to say, 'Look to your

**Arguing against
judging the
institution by
individual incidents.**

right and look to your left, and by the end of the year two of you will be gone,'" he said. "But Harvard is the exact opposite of that. The fact that we have the highest graduation rate in the nation proves it."

Mr. Rudenstine agreed. "Stress was a much more common problem in the 60's," he said, "when we had much less support for students."

Suzi Naiburg, senior tutor at Dunster House, where the deaths occurred on Sunday, is one of many who points out that Harvard's student-support programs, like those at many major colleges and universities, have increased enormously in recent years.

"At Dunster House," she said, "there are 16 resident and 31 non-

resident tutors. They are predominantly graduate students. They create study breaks where the students meet socially, they eat their meals with the students, play intramural games with the students and hold 'study buddy' meetings."

Still, a Harvard professor who spoke on condition of anonymity said students on the pre-medical track had become "hugely competitive," with corruptive results.

"Simultaneous with the recession," he said, "students and their parents came to believe that neither business nor even engineering offered financial security. And so they decided on a career in medicine. Immediately the pre-med courses became jammed, and some students began to cheat, steal exams."

Mr. Jewett acknowledged that there had been some suspensions for "academic dishonesty" this year. And Mr. Rudenstine said the stress on pre-med students had been a problem for as long as he could remember.

"If you have a parent who is a doctor," he said, "you get an awful lot of pressure to have a career in medicine."