

Students Faced With Suspension After Propping Door on Empire

Returning one January evening from the Price Chopper supermarket, three UAlbany students propped open a door using jugs of Gatorade. They shuttled about a month's worth of groceries (40 bags in all) to their third-floor apartment on Empire Commons in building B-5. The door, they said, was propped open for about a minute.

For that, they could be kicked out of the apartment and even suspended from school.

Vincent Tufaro, 21, of Northport, Eric Christensen, 22, from Dundee, and Michael Auricchio, 21, of Huntington were surprised to receive a letter several days later from the Department of Residential Life requesting a meeting.

At the meeting, Residential Life director Sara Blaney showed the students pictures taken from a hidden camera that showed the trio propping the door open.

Blaney told them that they could either sign a statement saying they had to leave Empire Commons in five days or face Judicial Review. There, she told them, the penalty could be far worse - suspension from school. The three students declined to sign the document, setting them up for judicial review.

Blaney, who has worked for Residential Life since 2000, declined to comment for this story or say how she was able to recognize the three students from the camera footage.

"I can't discuss this," she said. "It's a private matter that concerns those boys." When asked if she could comment on the enforcement of rules and penalties, she referred a reporter to the Community Rights and Responsibilities Handbook, the guidelines for UAlbany students.

However, at a meeting with Judicial Affairs director Clarence McNeil and Residential Life director Sally D'Alessandro went considerably better for the students, they said. They may face a lesser penalty - such as community service.

The three students also began collecting signatures late last week for a petition in hopes it might sway UAlbany officials. After one day, they had collected more than 100 names.

They will face McNeil and D'Alessandro again this Tuesday when they will know their fate.

Students can face suspension or expulsion from school for violating many of the rules in the handbook, including propping open exterior doors - mainly out of security concerns, according to the 38-page book.

But the students feel that Blaney's punishment was particularly and unusually harsh.

"We pay a lot of money to go here," said Vincent Tufaro, one of the students now under review.

"We feel like we've done a lot here. It's just a slap in the face. This school is here to help us.

This is totally interfering with our education."

Their case also raises questions about hidden surveillance systems around campus, and the power of one university official to expel students from dormitories.

The students said they don't have any prior run-ins with Residential Life in their four years living on campus.

The students said they felt as if they were being forced to sign away their four-bedroom apartment while meeting with Blaney, who told them this was their "best option."

"As a student, there's unequal bargaining power there," said Julianne Massarelli, a lawyer for Tully Rickney and Associates, an Albany-based law firm that specializes in student-related cases.

"They do have due process rights."

As for the hidden camera that caught the students, the device seemed to have been removed days after their meeting with Blaney.

"This is like cutting our hands off for stealing something," said another student, Michael Auricchio.

"The punishment doesn't fit the crime," said Eric Christensen, a UAlbany pre-law student.

The three students, all seniors who have been living together since they first came to UAlbany, don't know what will happen if they are kicked out of their apartment.

"I can't find a place to live in Albany right now," Tufaro said. "What am I supposed to do, live in my car?"

If evicted from the posh student apartment complex, the students won't see one cent of the \$8,493 they paid to live there.

"I haven't even told my parents yet," Auricchio said. "I don't know what to tell to my parents."