

By Joan Muwahed

Shock, panic and fear were a few of the words an Investigative Reporting Workshop intern at the American University campus used to define her experience during the lockdown on July 18.

Victoria Knight, a 26-year-old research reporting intern at AU said she was one of many who took shelter during the three-hour lockdown instigated by an “armed intruder” that was seen near New Mexico Avenue.

Knight walked out of the McKinley building with one of her editors when she received a call from a colleague saying that there was an intruder near campus.

“After hearing that, we ran to the SIS building and followed everyone down to an annex that connected the basement to the library,” she said.

They sought shelter in a conference room that had no windows, she said. People then began to take action and shield themselves from danger by placing tables to barricade the door, Knight said.

The group Knight was with were all instructed to sit on the floor and stay quiet, that was when “it felt very real,” she said.

“I got really scared because I really didn’t know what was happening, I was thinking to myself ‘what if it’s an active shooter,’ so I started crying,” Knight said.

Another intern and AU student, Brianna Crummy, 20, who currently works at the Investigative Reporting Workshop was also on campus during the lockdown. While working in her office in McKinley building, Crummy said she got an alert on her computer screen notifying that an “armed intruder” was near campus. “Initially it was a very scary situation,” she said.

“Everyone in the office locked all the doors and we were just waiting for the next response or alert,” Crummy said.

Multiple alerts were posted on AU’s public safety twitter page and emails were directed to students, faculty, and staff across campus. According to the emails sent, one of the system alerts stated: “if you are inside and are in immediate danger, exist as quickly as possible.”

According to a July 20 email, President of AU Sylvia M. Burwell said “Wednesday was an anxious day on campus.”

Burwell sent a memorandum to the campus two days following the lockdown, explaining her gratitude and support to the AU community.

“But first I would like to start by saying thank you. Thank you to the students, faculty, staff and visitors for your patience,” she said.

The American University Security Department, the Metropolitan Police Department, and law enforcement partners promptly evaluated the threat, specified instructions, and cleared and searched multiple buildings, she said.

The media relations department at AU did not make interviews available with AUPD officials regarding the incident.

There was a delay in email notifications from the alert system to the AU community during the lockdown, Burwell said.

“I want to apologize for those email delays. We quickly tracked down the issue and contacted the software vendor, who fixed the problem,” she said.

There were various follow-up emails, tweets, and messages throughout the lockdown, one of which stated: “Lockdown continues. Investigation ongoing. Technical issue delayed previous email alerts; now resolved. Continue to shelter in place.”

According to an Aug. 1 email, Director of Public Relations Kelly Alexander said not all students received the email or message alerts. The students could only access the alert messages if they were registered for the summer semester, she said.