

# The Dean's Almanac

## A Hard Week

*January 26, 2007*

It's been a very tough week here at UConn, and I know a lot of people are feeling pretty bad right now. I guess that Carlee Wines' death is so hard not just because she was, by all accounts, a truly lovely person, but because she died doing something that many of you do every day - crossing North Eagleville Rd. I know from hearing from your parents that this has hit them hard as well, because they can imagine you doing exactly what Carlee was doing, and their hearts ache for Carlee's parents and family. It is not hard for them to take that next step and imagine themselves in that situation.



If you're a regular reader of the Almanac, you know that I've addressed this crosswalk safety issue a couple of times before. I even got taken to task by one student who didn't like my comments, and memorably compared me to Spiderman in a letter to the Daily Campus, which was a little rough, but it had an interesting effect: I became known as someone obsessed with crosswalk safety. If you were among the freshmen I spoke to during opening weekend last August in Jorgensen, you might remember that I shared the list of statements that didn't make it into the UConn Creed, but got votes from some people. Right between #4 ("Domino's Delivers!") and #6 ("Know your Dean. Love your Dean," my personal favorite), was #5: "Look Both Ways Before Crossing."

But of course, what happened to Carlee was not a case of an inattentive driver hurrying to class. And it certainly wasn't a case of a pedestrian chatting on a cell phone and paying no attention to traffic. Carlee and her friends were in a crosswalk. What did happen was this: a horrific event that will forever scar the memories of those who witnessed it, will grow like a tumor in the conscience of the person who hit her and drove off into the night, and will leave the hearts of those who loved her broken for the rest of their lives. And it was this, too: something that has happened before, and something that we are all afraid will happen again. I can promise you that discussions about crosswalk safety have taken place, even before this week, and that some things have improved. But we continue to be vexed by the layout of our campus, where over 4800 students live across a public road from their classrooms and main hangouts and have to cross it multiple times each day. Throughout campus, we have too many blind spots, too many cars sharing space with pedestrians, too many intersections, too many people in a hurry or distracted while walking or driving. What happened to Carlee was a long way from the typical car-versus-pedestrian accident, but the pain her loss has caused is a reminder of what we have at stake with each of you.

Know this, Huskies: You each matter to us. Your safety matters tremendously. But we have got to pull together and figure this out as a community. I can't tell you how many faculty and staff have said to me this week, "I am so afraid I'm going to hit a student. I wish they'd pay more attention to what they're doing." It's about the same number of times I've heard others say, "I'm so afraid I'm going to get hit, even when I'm in a crosswalk, because people drive too fast and they don't pay attention." But there is no driver/pedestrian dichotomy here. We are each both of those at different times. The good guys and the bad guys are the *same* people - us.

When I was learning to drive, my dad said to me, "Drive as if no one else pays attention." Okay, it's made me a little paranoid at times, but it's also saved me - assuming that people will run stop signs, won't see me in their blind spot, aren't really going to turn, despite having their blinker on. So I'll say the same to each of you: When you step into the road, *assume* the driver is not paying attention, even if they should be. And when you're driving on campus, *assume* that the pedestrian on the sidewalk may step in front of you at any moment. Paranoid? Okay, I'll give you that. But if it keeps any one of you from being hurt, I think it's a fair trade. One parent wrote to me, "The bottom line is that the culture needs changing. All cars yield to pedestrians, but the pedestrians need to use equal care." Anyone who drives and is honest with themselves knows that they have had some close calls where their carelessness could have hurt someone but didn't.

A culture change? Yes, please. How about this: If you're the pedestrian, and a car has stopped for you so you can cross safely, smile and acknowledge the driver. And if you're the driver, smile and acknowledge the pedestrian. We all want the same thing - a safe campus, a culture where we care about one another. And maybe in that exchange of smiles, that's exactly what we will communicate to one another.

If you are feeling sad or angry about this, you're not alone. The hardest part of being in a community is that we risk exposure to tragedy. The best part of being in a community is that we share that risk with others who care about us.

Rest peacefully, Carlee. We'll try our best to do the same here.