

Arrest produces sense of guarded relief on area campuses

Susan Kauffman and Michele Kurtz

April 5, 1996

Some area professors and researchers will sleep a little better knowing a suspect in the Unabomber case is in custody, but nobody is ready to say the reign of terror has ended.

In 18 years of attacks, the Unabomber sent the majority of his bombs to universities, often striking researchers and professors.

Henry Kirkman, a semi-retired professor of pediatrics and former head of genetics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said he'd worried about the Unabomber since 1993. That's when Charles Epstein, a geneticist at the University of California at San Francisco, lost several fingers when a parcel bomb exploded at his home.

"We feel he could have been after us, too," Kirkman said. His department carefully scrutinized all strange packages for weeks.

Geneticists at Duke took the threats seriously, too, said one specialist who refused to give her name because she was afraid of copycat actions.

"I would hope they got the right person," she said. "I knew Charley Epstein very well, and what happened to him was tragic enough."

The attacks also struck close to home for Stephen Weiss, head of the UNC-CH Computer Science Department. One of Weiss' colleagues at another university was a target of a bomb, though he doesn't know if it was sent by the Unabomber. The package was opened by a secretary, who was injured.

"It hasn't driven us to paranoia, but it has made us cautious," Weiss said. "I think everyone is relieved, but as a computer scientist, I have a special sense of relief. The odds of being hit by the Unabomber are pretty low — sort of like being hit by lightning. But anything that makes my life a little less stressful is good." Kirkman, the UNC-CH geneticist, said: "Of course, the extent to which we breathe a sigh of relief is determined by the extent to which it is the right man."

Some authorities were cautioning universities and research companies Thursday not to let their guard down now.

"I don't think it's a signal to just go on our way and not be concerned about safety," said Ralph Harper, director of public safety at N.C. State University.

At NCSU, police last year conducted an inspection training session for campus mail employees. The training was partly a reaction to a Unabomber-linked slaying in which a California timber industry executive was killed.

NCSU officials also distributed guidelines on how to spot suspicious packages to faculty department heads and gave faculty members a police phone number to call if a package looks suspicious. In two years, police have received 10 or 12 calls, but no bombs.

At UNC-CH and Duke, campus police also distributed fliers.

Some of the instructions were almost funny, said Weiss, who recalled a warning not to open a package with wires sticking out of it. But another warning, alerting faculty to the Unabomber's common use of excessive postage, seemed valuable.

Researchers often are targets of mail and phone calls from people questioning their work, said Lew Wardell, assistant director of Duke Public Safety. And that's not going to change, he said.

"At a research institution like ours," Wardell said, "this is something that will exist apart from the Unabomber."

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UNABOMBER SUSPECT

THE NEWS & OBSERVER
FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 1996

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By SUSAN KAUFFMAN
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STAFF WRITERS

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The News & Observer, Page 12a. <www.archive.org/details/img-3992_202607>

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