

Off-campus fires claim young lives

By Robert Davis and Anthony DeBarros, USA TODAY

Linda Turnbull figured that one day she would attend the Emmy Awards to watch her daughter Julie receive a top television honor.



A sign is displayed on a utility pole near the campus of Miami University for one of three people who died in a house fire. David Kohl, AP

The senior majoring in mass communications at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, had been promised a job at the production company where she was working as an intern. She loved the work. Plus, she seemed to live a charmed life.

"She had a way of making you feel special, and she would brighten the room when she walked in with her smile," Linda Turnbull says. "She had everything going for her."

But Julie Turnbull was one of three college students who died when a house near campus burned April 10. She was spending the night with friends when a fire started in the recreation room of the house rented by nine students.

A USA TODAY study of deaths of four-year college students found that fires were a leading cause, especially for seniors. Seniors account for 36% of the fire fatalities in the study, which also found that when students die in fires, it usually happens just off campus.

Near-campus housing often lacks smoke alarms, sprinkler systems and easy escape routes. Ed Comeau, director of the Center for Campus Fire Safety in Amherst, Mass., says such houses are often older buildings, packed with electronics and young adults hosting parties and cooking for the first time in their own kitchens.



Turnbull

When the fire that killed Turnbull started in the early hours, flames raced through the 136-year-old house, gobbling up construction materials and spewing toxic fumes and smoke. Investigators say Turnbull died of smoke inhalation.

When a police officer called to tell Linda Turnbull that there had been a fire and she needed to make the hour drive to Oxford, she recalls feeling sorry for "those poor kids."

It did not sink in that the officer was trying to tell her that Julie had died. "Then, when I hung up, it just clicked that he means Julie is one of the victims," she says.

Even now, her mind still plays tricks on her. "Some days," she says, "I hope it's all a big mistake, and she will pop up."

PARENTS SHOULD EVALUATE RISKS

The USA TODAY analysis of student deaths finds that a disproportionate number of freshmen die. They represent 35% of undergraduate deaths in the study — but only 24% of the undergraduate population — from such causes as illness, suicides and accidents.

Parents should be "aware of the potential risks to college students and take reasonable measures," says Ann Franke of Wise Results, a Washington-based education law and risk management firm.



Franke says one option parents may consider is visiting the local emergency room to ask personnel what illnesses or injuries they see in college students. That could provide a glimpse of the dangers in their child's new world, she says.

Peer pressure

Parents need to prepare their children for the unexpected by asking, "What are you going to do if you see a friend in trouble?" says Helen Johnson, a Chapel Hill, N.C.-based consultant in parent relations for universities.

Related questions:

Can you put the brakes on a risky situation and stay friends?

Do you always wear your seat belt?
What would you do if a student was driving poorly, under the influence or while distracted?

Geof Brown of the North America Interfraternity Conference says parents should get involved when their children become interested in a fraternity or sorority. He says parents should look inside frat houses and talk to their freshmen about where to pledge. For every fraternity that looks like a set from the movie *Animal House*, he says, 10 are well-kept and suited for study.

"If they can't take care of the place where they are supposed to be living, learning and building a strong fraternity together, then it says a lot about where their priorities are."

Fire safety

Apartments and other housing just off campus often lack smoke alarms, sprinkler systems and easy escape.

Instead, says Ed Comeau of the Center for Campus Fire Safety in

Amherst, Mass., all housing should be inspected for smoke alarms, sprinkler systems and an easy way to escape. On campus, experts suggest that parents find out the school's policies on heat sources in dorms and discuss them with their children.

In the reports studied by USA TODAY, 76% of the students who died in fires were within 2 miles of campus; 73% were within 1 mile. Only 14% died on campus.

Among other seniors who died was Jamie Dutko, 22, of Strongsville, Ohio. He was one of two people killed in a fire May 19, 2001, near Ohio University. The fire started under a desk near computer wiring. Smoke alarms in the residence

were not working, according to fire officials in Athens.

After the fire, city officials began requiring smoke alarms with batteries that cannot be removed. But Athens Fire Chief Robert Troxel says some college students now just remove the whole smoke detector when it sounds during smoky parties or overcooked meals.

"It gets back to responsibility," Troxel says. "Don't remove fire safety equipment. Lettie Latiolais, who lost her son, Kurt, in a fire near Louisiana State University on Oct. 18, 2003, says parents must consider fire risks because "the kids are not concerned."

"I teach elementary school, and we always taught our children fire safety," she says. "Then we bring our two kids to LSU, and we never once thought about fire safety. We just assumed it was taken care of."

Though colleges have no responsibility for the structures that surround their campuses, some schools and governments try to prepare students before they move out into the community.

The state of New York sends officials from the fire marshal's office to campuses to inspect buildings and teach students about fire safety. Since the program began two years ago, it has reached tens of thousands of students.

"We are hoping that by catching the students in their freshman year, we get fire safety in their minds," says Paul Martin, a deputy chief in New York's office of Fire Prevention and Control.

"Then, when they move off campus, they have already seen this. We want this to be a lifestyle change." Linda Turnbull says parents should insist on higher standards. When she went to collect her daughter's belongings, she says, she was reminded that Julie died on the threshold of her adult life.

"When we went in her room, we saw that she had picked up her cap and gown that day. They were laid out on her bed."