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Graduate jumps to his death in RPI stairwell

Amherst, Mass., resident was a "gifted young man" who had done well at college, his family says

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Correction: *Anson Tripp was a member of the Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity.*

TROY -- The morning after he turned 29, Anson Tripp made his final visit to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where he had spent some of the happiest days of his life.

Tripp went into the stairwell of the tallest building on the RPI campus Thursday after arriving from his home in Amherst, Mass., and jumped to his death, Detective Sgt. John Cooney said.

A computer science and mathematics major who graduated with the class of 2000, Tripp knew RPI intimately from two summers on campus as a high school student and four years as an undergraduate. He returned during Grand Marshal Week when the undergraduates elect the student government and many alumni arrive to join in the festivities.

On Thursday, Tripp parked his car on campus and walked to the RPI's nine-story George M. Low Center for Industrial Innovation. He went to the top of the interior stairwell, climbed over a rail and fell 4 stories to his death, Cooney said.

"RPI was a significant part of the victim's life," Cooney said.

Family members described Tripp as depressed and were concerned about his state of mind, Cooney said.

"He was a very gifted young man," Zella Harrington, Tripp's mother, said in a phone interview from Amherst Thursday night.

She said her son was "very shy," but that RPI was a bright spot for him.

"He made a lot of friends at RPI," she said. While at the school, she said he was a member of the Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity.

At 10 a.m., an RPI staffer discovered Tripp's broken body between the fourth and fifth floor stairway landings, police said. During the next seven hours the RPI administration would shut down the campus. Troy and Colonie police SWAT teams combed the CII building, as the Low Center is known on campus, looking for a possible gunman.

When police first saw Tripp's wounds, they appeared similar to those inflicted by gunshots. But no weapon was found near the body, Cooney said.

Officers immediately treated the situation as a possible homicide. They secured the facility to protect students, faculty and staff inside from harm.

Officers began the slow search of the nine-story, 200,000-square-foot building.

The 7,400 undergraduate and graduate students around campus had no idea what was happening when RPI President Shirley Anne Jackson issued a statement ending the school day and shutting down the campus.

While students evacuated classrooms, labs and libraries, Troy detectives contacted Tripp's family in Amherst, Mass. That's when investigators learned Tripp was an engineering graduate student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and worked as a clerk at the Trader Joe's grocery store in Hadley, Mass., Cooney said.

Claude Rounds, RPI's vice president for administration, said Tripp was an exceptional student who was involved in campus activities.

After the CII was secured, Tripp's body was taken to Albany Medical Center Hospital for an autopsy. The Rensselaer County medical examiner ruled Tripp had committed suicide, dying from the massive trauma caused by the fall. Tripp had multiple fractures to his head, spine and limbs as well as other injuries, Cooney said.

RPI will resume its normal schedule of activities today.

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