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The Price of Safety

A local student wants to help the police make the streets safer, but they say he is making their job more difficult

At 8:45 PM on a chilly September night after leaving class, Anton Konev was pinned to the sidewalk on Washington Avenue as fists were slammed into his body. Surrounded by six men, Konev simply did not fight back.

“They realized I wasn’t going to punch back and that’s what they wanted,” says Konev. Left lying on the sidewalk as his attackers took off, Konev immediately called 911 on his cell phone and just as quickly, he said, he found himself on hold. “I mentioned I was a student,” said Konev. The operator transferred him to the University Police, who, learning that he was not on campus, transferred him back to the Albany police. “They asked, ‘Do you feel safe now? Do you need an ambulance?’ And I didn’t, and I had a paper to write, so that was that,” Konev reported.

But that was not that.

Konev realizes that his experience pales in comparison to other incidents involving local students. Apartments have been robbed at gunpoint, students hit over heads with rocks and then mugged, and through it all, Konev says, the APD and the UAPD have been playing a blame game. “There was a lot of back and forth going on,” he said. “‘They should be patrolling here,’ and ‘We can only patrol on this block.’ There needs to be more communication between those departments.”

Tired of hearing police safety recommendations such as “Avoid walking alone at night,” and “Always carry a cell phone,” Konev decided to take action. Konev approached the APD about starting a neighborhood watch in the Pine Hills neighborhood. Konev has also been involved in a campaign to draw the attention of the city’s politicians to what he claims is “a lack of planning and resources.”

At a press conference held last Thursday (Nov. 3), Konev announced the start of the watch with help from UAlbany graduate student and Common Council Ward 11 candidate Alfredo Balarin; Jeff Blay, the local organizer of the Guardian Angels; and Guillermo Martinez, a 19-year city resident and head of the Coalition to Save Albany, a group of citizens, community activists and graduate students. Martinez offered a plan he says will help ensure there are enough police on the street that neighborhood groups will not have to watch over the streets.

According to Martinez, politicians have failed to address the larger issue of crime in the city. He proposed a commuter tax he said would make up for the burden placed on the city’s emergency and crime- prevention resources by the large commuter base. “Imposing a third of one percent commuter tax on people this city has to provide police, fire and emergency service to can generate millions that can be used to improve street lighting, almost double the size of the police force and virtually stop all crime in this city,” he stated.

While the Albany police have offered to look into restarting the Pine Hills community watch, Konev claims they are not very happy that he challenges their claims that crimes against students have seen a steady decrease over the years. Detective James Miller, spokesman for the APD, has continually cited University statistics that show a 48 percent decrease in crime against



We're a presence: Alfredo Balarin (far left), Anton Konev (far right), and other members of the new Midtown Neighborhood Watch.

photo:Teri Currie

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UAlbany students between 1992 and 2004. Both Guillermo and Konev insist that those statistics are flawed because they only take into account crime on campus.

Konev is certain crime has increased off campus to a great degree over the years and points to FBI crime statistics that show Albany's crime-per-person rate is double that of most cities in the United States. At the press conference on Monday (Nov. 7), he demanded the Common Council hold an emergency meeting "to deal with the crime wave, resources for the police department and an inquiry of why this information has been kept from the public."

Konev said he then received what he characterized as a "threatening call" from Sgt. Fred Alberti, the officer who had arranged to work with Konev on starting the Pine Hills watch, saying that in holding the press conference and citing those negative statistics, Konev was not being a team player, and that Alberti would find another group to work with if Konev continued to be difficult.

Miller counters that Alberti called Konev after the press conference to find out why the group was holding more negative press conferences the day before the start of the neighborhood watch. Alberti noted his frustration at having to be "worrying if you say something in the wrong tone the guy is going to run to the *Times Union* or the *Metroland*."

"This reeks of a political agenda on the eve of the election," Miller said. He further claims that the group's allegation that it is safer to live in the Bronx is misleading. "I broke it down into the neighborhoods they are talking about. Their murders are on the same level as Albany, so it is not double. I'm not going to disagree with the FBI statistics, but they are misleading," insists Miller.

Miller stated that working with the students is paramount. "The students are part of the solution, not part of the problem," he remarked, but insisted Konev's press conferences are politically motivated and "undermining what we are trying to do."

On Tuesday night, Sgt. Alberti made it known that press were not welcome into the neighborhood watch meeting, saying it was a small room and the group was just getting started. Konev arrived, saw the room full of officials including Miller, whom he notes has been refuting his every claim in the press, and told a friend on his cell phone "I'm not going in there alone."

After the meeting, however, Konev was hopeful. He reported that the newly christened Midtown Neighborhood Watch would begin after Thanksgiving break. "We're taking it one step at a time, we're going to get uniforms and start training before Thanksgiving," he reported. Asked about the tension between himself and the police he replied, "They gave me first a big lecture. They didn't feel the second press conference was helpful, but they agreed the first one was good to draw attention, get people excited."

—David King

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