

John Carlin: Dr. Steger Thank you for taking the time, I know it has been a long year for you.

Charles Steger: Glad to do it.

Carlin: Let's talk about the Anniversary this year on April 16 itself. What exactly in the University trying to accomplish?

Steger: Well I think two things. One if I may just say. April 16th the ceremony that we are going to have, comes from a committee made up of students and faculty and family members who lost their child or injured students and they have come together and talked for a number of weeks to create a ceremony that we think will appropriately remember the students that we lost. Recognize the students that were injured, and also be part of the process of healing the community.

You know earlier on and still today there is this great collective sense of grief. And it is necessary that we go through the process of grieving, both individually and collectively. And so we want to recognize these young people with an appropriate dignified ceremony and at the same time still make a contribution to helping the community to move forward. So that's what we are trying to do.

Carlin: You are expecting a lot of media.

Steger: Yes. Several hundred are registered already.

Carlin: And you do have strict ground rules already. Is it overly restrictive in a media setting where everything is supposed to be free and open?

Steger: I think in terms of formal interviews like this, it's organized through our university relations office because we obviously can't cope with 2-3 hundred requests. But in terms of talking with students, and others, we place no restrictions on that. It's up to the student to decide if they want to talk to the media or not.

Carlin: Larry has said if you would please just not go into the student center etc. I was even surprised at that.

Steger: As you know there is a broad range of emotions about the media as a result of last April 16. And so I think that in the classroom and things like that they are entitled to a little protection from that. If they are out in the common areas then they have to make the decision themselves.

Carlin: Do you think the media went too far in the days following the shooting?

Steger: As you know, it was a global story. It was on CNN worldwide 24 hours a day. I had communications with my friends from Japan and Europe and everywhere else. I would say that you can't paint the media with one broad brush. I think that we had a range of behaviors that were there. I think that many of our particularly local units behaved very responsibly. But we did have some rather extreme behavior, that was unfortunate and didn't contribute to the kind of environment that we were trying to create.

Carlin: Is there one particular story that stands out?

Steger: Well we had people attempting to get into private meetings with the families and things like that. And we wanted to protect them from things like that.

Carlin: Posing as students?

Steger: Well they were posing as a lot of things. Fortunately they weren't very successful at that but it's that sort of thing that wasn't helpful.

Carlin: As you look back on the last year, what do you think has successfully been accomplished already and what still needs to be done?

Steger: I think the community is probably stronger today than it was a year ago. That sense of community and resiliency that was demonstrated by particularly our students, is something that enabled us to cope with the tragedy in a way we probably couldn't have done without that.

So it's reinforced the fact that building the sense of community is something that we work at all the time. It's something you can't do after the crisis occurs.

A lesson that I would share with my colleagues across the country -- and they all know this -- is that sense of community. Working with the faculty and the staff and the students is something that has been vital to our ability to recover.

Carlin: You have had all of these committees and there are all of these recommendations coming from every possible direction, whether it's firearms, or mental health or locking down the university. And among all of those recommendations, how much has been done, and how much needs to be done?

Steger: We had over 400 recommendations, which the various -- we've had a series of groups. You need broad input from the community, which is why I had that town hall meeting the other week, but you are also -- in terms of the rather significant financial commitments involved -- you have to have expert advice at the same time. And we took all the 400 and went through various reviews and we got it down to 33 major initiatives, because sometimes we had 4 different reports and sometimes the recommendations conflict.

It doesn't mean that one is bad, but you can't take them in isolation. And also we wanted to make our investments -- give us the best possible return so those have been prioritized. They are in the process of being implemented. Many, many of them are already done.

For example the VT alerts thing. We have over 20-thousand people signed up and it works. But of course you want everybody signed up. And we are doing pretty well, because nationally only about 40-percent of the people sign up for that.

Another lesson from that is that only one system of communication is not adequate. You have to have redundancy to get through to people. Particularly at seven o'clock in the morning.

We hope to have virtually every major initiative -- which encompasses those 400 recommendations done by this fall.

Carlin: Would you say most of the heavy lifting, so to speak, is still in the mental health arena?

Steger: Yes. I'd say it's the most complex one. You have this need to strengthen our early warning systems, but as you well know there are serious issues of privacy.

I think there can be and I hope reasonable compromise where -- when there are issues and information that should be shared, it doesn't have to be shared with the entire university community. It doesn't have to be in the student's record, and I don't even have to know about it. Our professionals -- I think we need to find ways that we do know. ...

Children arrive on campus today -- 15 or 20 years ago -- I see a great change in the stress they experience and the difficulty they have already in life and the complexity of the world that they face which when I was a student at Virginia Tech was not here. It's a bigger challenge today that it was before.

Carlin: If someone with Sung Hoi Cho's mental profile appeared on campus today -- or is on campus today, how would that person already be handled differently that he was a year ago?

Steger: Well I think that we put in place the threat assessment team. I think that one of the most effective defenses is to raise the level of sensitivity of all of us, particularly amongst the students, that if you see behavior that is unusual, that it is ok to tell somebody about it.

And the other part of that is that we have to create a climate where students feel comfortable in coming knowing that the confidences will not be broken. We have to create a system, where if that information is wrong, that person is not damaged.

But if you find you know, and individual -- a student that is willing to take their own life, there is almost no defense. And so it has to be preemptive and you have to observe, and the people who observe are the people who are around them most often.

There is a new, "normal" set across America, and we all will try to be more sensitive to that, than we were before.

Carlin: It's only been a year and you've only known for a certain amount of time -- I know the wheels turn slowly -- especially with mental health but how far along are you?

Steger: I think some bills were introduced in the General Assembly. I think one of the key issues is that they are getting some funding that they really deserved in the past.

But I still think there is some work to do in terms of what can be shared, particularly the high school records. Mr. Cho had some issues there. We had no knowledge of them. I think that in the future, I would hope in an appropriate way, we could be advised of those things.

Carlin: Your administration came under attack for not locking down the campus after the shooting at West AJ. You have defended the university's position. Hindsight being 20-20, do you still maintain that the university went through all the proper steps?

Just to put it in perspective, what does it mean to "lock down" the campus. We have 2600 acres, 153 buildings, 19 miles of road and at that time of the morning, you have 9-thousand students in residence, but we have at that time of the morning somewhere between 18 and 22-thousand coming into the campus. Not to mention the thousands of visitors we have and the hundreds of contactors and everything that's going on.

In that particular case, Mr. Cho was in his dormitory. And then he went off campus and then came back again. So we believe -- more than believe -- I have had our police evaluated by experts both the state police, FBI and other in homeland security. We feel that they followed all the benchmark practices for dealing with an issue like that.

No one--hind sight is great--but no one had any idea that there would be a second shooting of the magnitude that we experienced.

Carlin: Realistically then you stand behind your position?

Steger: I think that you have a basic issue there is you only have so many people on duty particularly in the morning so you really need to deploy them to the scene rather than to direct traffic. There is a trade off there when the resources are not imminent particularly when they are being assembled and no one really knows what is going on.

Carlin: As the events were unfolding a year ago on that day late in the afternoon and the second day a lot of momentum was against you especially in the national media and then it shifted. Why?

Steger: Well I think, well you have to understand people always look for a simple solution even though it is a very complex problem. In society we want instant news and instant solutions and go on to the next thing and you have to understand the anger and frustration and dismay that a lot of people were experiencing you have to be compassionate and appreciate that the individual that committed the crime was dead and people were looking for some focus for their energies and as president of the university that came to me.

The other thing that people found when they came around and talked to students and faculty that the students--we couldn't coach them and we aren't smart enough to do that anyway-- but I think their expressions of support were extraordinary and they were heart felt on their part and I think people began to realize that there was more to this than we fully appreciated.

That sense of community, it was very powerful those days, I can tell you.

Carlin: You have decided not to build a memorial that is larger than the one on the drillfield. How come?

Well there are several reasons and this is a result of-- I didn't do scientific study of it--but I have talked with a number of the families and the general university community, and there are two things the memorial has. Its roots and the foundation is in the emotions of our students. The Hokies United are the first ones who laid it out. I wish I could say I had, I had nothing to do with it. They did it spontaneously, and I think they did a wonderful job on it. But they felt empowered, and they knew whatever they did we would be supportive, and we are.

So I think it's got that history there. The second thing is that to build a memorial somewhere else doesn't carry that. You can spend millions of dollars and build some edifice, but the meaning would have been lost because the Tuesday night after we the congregation we had the vigil on the drillfield. I was there 7 or 8 thousand standing in absolute silence and those kind of things just can't be replicated somewhere else so we think this is an appropriate memorial and we have obviously done things to enhance it--the lighting and all that sort of thing--and as far as I know everybody is content. Virtually everybody is content--you can't get everybody--but virtually everybody is content

Carlin: The decision last August to keep this memorial why not just announce it?

Steger: Well, I am not sure that is accurate we--I had a committee looking at a permanent memorial and I asked them not to pursue it further but it was really just really a few months before that this was the right thing to do. I wanted to get a little more feedback from everybody.

Carlin: The state university offered \$100,000 to the recipients or the potential recipients which are the families who lost loved ones on the day of the shootings. Is that enough money?

Steger: Well I don't think you can place a value on people's lives as you know we have given or provided \$200,000 out of the Hokie memorial fund already and this amount was arrived at through various ways of analyzing the situation. What we are trying to do--how can we help these families move forward and recover? No amount of money can fix the tragedy but can relieve some of the stress from the families and the other thing that we worked very hard to do is ensure that the injured students have healthcare for the rest of their lives.

Whatever it takes and to me that is very important because there is a smaller number but there is a group that has injuries that many effect them for the rest of their lives and we want to make sure they are taken care of as best we can so I cant say what's enough.

Carlin: The attorney's representing the families is calling it "hush" money is that fair?

Steger: No, we--I think it is in everybody's best interest to bring this to closure. We are in the middle of that right now, and we get a lot of overstatement in these things, that is not helpful.

We look back on that week a year ago the sadness information seeking media everything that was going on you were the one person at the focal point--how did you stand it?

Well its uh--its one of those things that I wouldn't want to repeat it it was absolutely horrible but its one of those times that tests what you really believe in and I think that as I tell many of our students you know is very important as you develop and grow--this is a life long project--to evolve values and a personal philosophy that tells you what you think is important and what you really believe deep down inside. Because when the crisis occurs, it's too late you have to have that guiding framework in place

So to me, I have been fortunate to over time to spend a lot of time thinking about those issues because they are at the root to being able to give leadership to a wonderful place like Virginia Tech.

There has to be a sense of trust there has to be a sense of openness. The vision that we have for the institution is a result of collective activity but it is your job as the president to articulate that vision and to ensure that broad basis of support and move forward.

Carlin: How did you do that? You must have been getting no sleep.

Steger: About 2 hours a night.

Carlin: You had to been exhausted for a couple of days you had families you were trying to notify people trying to figure out who all was impacted but this and you still formulate policy. I mean physically how did you do it?

Steger: It was exhausting. There is no question about it. I use to run cross country (laughs) not marathon running but long distance running that's not a good analogy--but you had to do it--you had no choice. All these people were depending on you, decisions had to be made and you and to stand up under the scrutiny that was coming from everywhere even though there was a lot of incomplete or misinformation. You had to manage how to work your way through this.