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News Release

For Immediate Release
April 16, 2009

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Fairfax, VA – Lawsuits were filed today in Fairfax County Circuit Court on behalf of two families who lost their daughters in the April 16, 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech. The families authorized their attorney to file lawsuits on their behalf today, the second anniversary of Seung Hui Cho’s rampage in Norris Hall on the Virginia Tech campus.

Celeste and Grafton Peterson of Virginia, and Harry and Karen Pryde of New Jersey, issued the following joint statement:

We raised our daughters with a sense of integrity, a desire to seek the truth and a belief in keeping their word. Virginia Tech did not keep its word to us. We have filed this lawsuit in the hope that we will receive accountability for the tragic events of April 16, 2007.

The faculty and students at Virginia tech have been extremely supportive of the families during this difficult time. Erin and Julia loved Virginia Tech and they felt at home there and were receiving a wonderful education. But, on April 16, 2007 the administrators who ran the university let our daughters down in ways we are just now learning.

Sadly, the Report of the (Virginia Tech) Review Panel to the Governor, issued in August 2007, contained important inaccuracies, despite the panel’s best efforts to get to the truth. University officials, it now appears, may have been less than candid and forthright in their responses to the questions put to them by the panel.

Important entries in the university’s tendered timeline were erroneous. Although university officials claim that they believed that the 7:15 shootings of the first two students were the tragic end to a lover’s triangle, and posed no further threat to students and faculty, their actions indicate otherwise. The Emergency Policy Group, assembled by President Steger in response to the initial killings, ordered a lock down of their own offices, departments and homes, while allowing the students and faculty on the rest of the campus to remain at risk.

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Misstatements of facts since April 16th, 2007 have further persuaded us that the complete truth remains to be revealed. What may be efforts to manage the truth through distortion have led us to the unfortunate conclusion that we must file suit.

Examples of misstatements of fact include:

- The contention by the university's public relations office to the Governor's review panel that at 9:26 a.m. on April 16, 2007, the campus was notified of "a homicide" at West Ambler Johnston Hall is a false statement.
- The contention by the director of the Cook Counseling Center that Seung Hui Cho, the shooter, had been diagnosed and treated by the New River Valley Community Services Board, and not returned to the student population until it was convinced he was no longer a danger to himself or others is a false statement.
- The contention by Virginia Tech's vice president of student affairs that Mr. Cho had been evaluated for dangerousness three times by three different therapists at the Cook Counseling Center, and certified non-dangerous is a false statement.

In the spring of 2008, the university proposed a settlement to the families of all claims. We reviewed these proposals with an open mind. We were told by Virginia Tech that if we would settle our claims the university would open up its document archives to us. Each of us independently concluded that we could not accept the settlement without knowing the truth about what happened on April 16, 2007. We asked that the document archives be opened for our review, believing that if the truth was as the university described it, then we would be favorably disposed to consider the settlement. However, the university would not grant our request for all the facts.

We respect the decisions of the families who accepted the Commonwealth's proposal. However, we have decided that agreeing to settle before we knew the full truth was not appropriate for us.

When the university subsequently released its document archives to the public in February 2009, we were convinced that we made the right choice to refuse the settlement. These document archives consist mainly of emails dating back to 2005, leading us to the conclusion that the official public record omits a large volume of important documents, such as information about whether appropriate actions were taken in the treatment of Seung Hui Cho's mental illness.

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Cho's writings with their themes of violence against students and faculty were not included in the documents provided to us. His mental health records from Cook Counseling Center and the New River Valley Community Services Board are not included. No minutes of the meeting of the Emergency Policy Group were provided. Two years later, neither we, the public, nor the Governor's panel have been told who made up the Emergency Policy Group on April 16, 2007.

One of the most troubling discoveries has come from our own investigations, a review of the document archives, and witness statements. At the time of the shootings, the university was within two weeks of launching its largest fundraising drive ever. It appears university officials delayed warning students and faculty that a gunman who had killed two students was at large and might still be on campus in order to manage "the message in the way least harmful to the university's image." In an email to President Steger sent at 1:58 p.m. on April 16, 2007, while our daughters' bodies still lay in Norris Hall, one of the advisory co-chairs of that fund drive suggested to President Steger that this horrific incident had "ramifications to the (fundraising) weekend" which "represents an opportunity to communicate...and to solicit support both financially and morally."

Within a few days of the tragedy, the fund raising gala had been rescheduled, and a week later the university hired the largest public relations firm in the country, Burson Marsteller, to manage its message under a \$600,000 contract negotiated in its entirety after April 16.

Our decision to file this suit against the university and its administrators has been made only after grave and serious thought. We believe that our suit is necessary to reveal truths that ultimately will benefit all those who have shared in this tragic loss, and that it will help heal the wounds that remain open because full disclosure of the facts has been denied. These lawsuits will be conducted in an open and public forum, and we welcome the opportunity to seek truth and justice.

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Note: Copies of the Peterson and Pryde lawsuits are attached.