

Family Press Statement

On Saturday, March 11, 2006, the Conroy family was notified that their daughter, Ashley Soulé Conroy, had died in a tragic fall in India at 4:00 a.m. March 12, 2006, India time. Ashley, a junior on the Dean's List at the College of Charleston, had been on a Junior Year Abroad program with Pacific Village Institute ("PVI"), an overseas study program with its international headquarters in New York City.

As may be expected, the initial information concerning Ashley's death was vague and unclear. The fact that the death occurred in a rural part of a foreign country exacerbated the problem. Foul play was initially suspected by the family.

With the enormous assistance of U.S. Representative Bobby Jindal, Mr. Jatinder Jolly, Princess Yasho Raje Scindia (known in New Orleans as Princess Yasho Bhansali), who is also a member of Indian Parliament and Minister of Tourism, and Patrick McNeil of the U.S. Embassy in New Dehli, the family embarked on a journey to investigate.

On Tuesday, March 14, 2006, Ashley's parents, Cynthia Phillips Schmidt and Stephen K. Conroy, flew to India to seek answers and to bring Ashley's remains back home. They were accompanied by John Eastman, the co-founder of Pacific Village Institute. United States Marine Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Bazin, a close relative of the family, arrived in Dehli, India, in advance of Ashley's parents inasmuch as he was in Korea for business at the time of Ashley's death.

The autopsy report and video of such autopsy were examined by a forensic pathologist in Dehli, who confirmed that the cause of death was due to a blunt trauma head consistent with a fall. While in Dehli, the family had a three hour interview with the other Pacific Village students and directors.

Ashley's parents then traveled to Bodhgaya, India, to the Root Institute. The investigation included an inspection of the accident site, the stairwells, and the unprotected flat rooftop; interviews with both the Root Institute Executive Director and Medical Director; and a lengthy interview with the Bodhgaya Superintendent of Police. The roof had an apparent design defect inasmuch as the stairs are so close to the edge of the sloping perimeter of the roof. There are no railings on the roof or stairs, and there are no lights. Retreat leaders and students regularly visited the flat rooftop for spectacular views and contemplation. There were even chairs regularly kept on the roof.

The Root Institute has acknowledged that the design of the roof and stairwell is dangerous due to its lack of railings and lights. The Root Institute's Executive Director is an architect, who had only assumed the position a few days prior to Ashley's death. She said that they had planned to install rails around the perimeter of the roof, but "had not gotten around to it yet." The family has demanded that the roof access be closed immediately until adequate railings and lighting are installed. The Institute has agreed to implement these improvements. The Root Institute has also agreed to install a plaque in Ashley's name.

Ashley's parents laid flowers at the place of Ashley's death; returned to Dehli; and then escorted her remains back to New Orleans. Congressman Bobby Jindal, his staff and family assisted the Conroy family with some of the many bureaucratic issues that arose.

On March 23, 2006, the Jefferson Parish Coroner's office conducted its own autopsy, which preliminarily confirms the forensic findings of the Indian pathologists. The Coroner's investigation is on going and not complete.

The family is establishing a non-profit organization to be known as The Ashley Soulé Conroy Foundation. The Foundation's mission is to create a permanent endowment and award scholarships to highly qualified students who wish to study abroad in India and other countries, based on their financial needs and other factors. Pacific Village Institute shall also establish a scholarship in Ashley's name and in her honor, which shall partner with the Foundation for the stated purposes.

Ashley was an amazing person, who touched everyone she met. She was laid-back, funny, artistic, kind, and loving. She loved the whole world and everyone in it. In her emails to family and friends, she wrote "i finally feel like i'm settling into the life and pace of things over here which, i must admit, fits my personality very well! it all seems so much simpler over here. i love it!"

Ashley is the daughter of Cynthia Phillips Schmidt and Stephen Kenneth Conroy; sister of Brooke Sholars Conroy, Emma Marks Conroy, and Lilyon Cooper Conroy; step-daughter of Christine Marks Conroy and Leonard Frederick Schmidt III; granddaughter of Mary Lou Soulé Conroy, the late George Edward Conroy, Jr., the late Dr. John Hunter Phillips Jr., and the late Mary Jo Phillips. A service will be held at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, 2216 Metairie Road on Saturday, March 25, 2006, at 3:00 p.m. Visitation will begin at 1:00 p.m. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that a donation to the Ashley Soulé Conroy Foundation be made at AmSouth Bank, 3525 N. Causeway Boulevard, Metairie, Louisiana 70002 Attn. Paul Navarro or any branch office.

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