

HIGHER EDUCATION

A UNC Student's Overdose Death at Duke

A Carolina freshman was found unconscious in a Duke University dorm room in March and died two days later of a drug overdose. Neither university said anything publicly about her death until contacted by The Assembly.

by Charlotte Kramon and Michael Hewlett October 16, 2023



Elizabeth Grace Burton, 19, was a business student at the University of North Carolina. (Photo illustration by Taylor Le for The Assembly)

Paramedics rushed into a residence hall on Duke University's Kilgo quad at about 6:30 a.m. on March 9 and climbed to the third floor of the old stone building around the corner from Duke Chapel. In room 309, they found a pale, chilled body in a puffy jacket, on her back in a twin bed and glistening in a pool of sweat.

The young woman was barely breathing, according to the 911 call log and an investigative report. A trash can sat next to the bed.

After almost an hour of treatment for cardiac arrest, an ambulance took Elizabeth Grace Burton, a business student from Charlotte and member of Zeta Tau Alpha at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to the Duke University Hospital. Two days later, she was pronounced dead. Burton was 19.

A state [autopsy](#) says she died of cardiac arrest from a toxic mix of cocaine and alcohol. A private [autopsy](#) also found fentanyl and GHB, a depressant that can give feelings of euphoria.

Until contacted by *The Assembly*, Duke University and UNC-Chapel Hill said nothing publicly about the death. Duke said it deferred to UNC because Burton was a student there, and UNC said it considers the family's wishes when deciding to release a statement.

No one has been charged with Burton's death. But Burton's companion that night, former Duke student Patrick Rowland, has pleaded guilty to using a cell phone to facilitate the distribution of cocaine and marijuana. Rowland, 22, is scheduled to appear in federal court on October 18 for a status hearing and will be sentenced in December.

Rowland could face a civil suit from Burton's family. He is no longer at Duke. Duke officials won't say whether he was expelled or left voluntarily.





The campus of Duke University. (Kate Sheppard for *The Assembly*)

A Durham man seen on video carrying Burton to Rowland's dorm room earlier that morning, Cye Frasier, 45, has been charged with cocaine and fentanyl distribution, unlawful use of a communication facility, and possession of a firearm. Carlisa Allen, a Durham woman who prosecutors identified as his girlfriend in a criminal complaint, faces the same charges.

Local and federal prosecutors declined to comment on whether they will bring charges in Burton's death.

Christopher Adkins of Huntersville, the lawyer for Grace Burton's mother, said they hope federal prosecutors will charge Frasier with Burton's death in a superseding indictment, as they did in another death in March. The Burton family also wants Rowland to be charged in Burton's death, and they have hired a private investigator.

"They're not investigating any of this stuff, and Duke doesn't want to," Adkins said. "Someone took her body and hid it away in the dorm room for an hour while she died."

Adkins said EMS personnel were unaware that Burton had used cocaine, which sometimes is laced with fentanyl. If responders had known, they could have administered Narcan, or another type of naloxone that can reverse the effects of overdosing from an opioid like fentanyl. "No one tries to administer Narcan because no one knows what they're doing," Adkins said. "And she dies."

“No one tries to administer Narcan because no one knows what they’re doing. And she dies.”

— Christopher Adkins, lawyer for Grace Burton’s mother

A Duke student interviewed by *The Assembly* disputed Adkins’ allegations, saying that he was with Rowland when he told paramedics they had used cocaine.

Burton’s mother, Lisa Anne Burton, declined a request for an interview.

Rowland and his attorney declined to comment. Duke declined to respond to Adkins’ allegations.

This article is based on interviews and a review of the 911 transcript, indictments, Frasier’s detention order, autopsies, motions, and other court documents.

Burton’s death reveals an often hushed but extensive drug culture at two of the state’s leading academic institutions. She is not the only UNC student who died of an overdose in recent months. WUNC **reported** recently that Dean Blackburn, the university’s director of student wellness, told the UNC-CH Board of Trustees that in the last 20 months, three students and one young alumnus died of fentanyl poisoning.

A Fatal Meeting on Tinder

In the days following her death, Grace Burton’s peers flooded social media with hundreds of comments reminiscing about her sweetness. “Thank you for how welcome you made me feel from the very beginning,” one posted. “Grace was such a sweet and kind girl in the short time that I knew her,” wrote another.

Burton, 5-foot-8 and blonde, was the director of sisterhood for Zeta Tau Alpha, one of UNC’s most coveted sororities. She’d been admitted into the undergraduate program at UNC’s Kenan-Flagler Business School, according to her **obituary**.

She and Rowland met on Tinder, according to Adkins and a friend of Rowland who asked not to be named to discuss a sensitive matter. The two messaged for several weeks before meeting for the first time during the early hours of March 9, when Rowland went to Chapel Hill to pick her up.

Rowland was a member of Duke’s Alpha Tau Omega, a fraternity known for its love of country music, beer, and football. But his friend said the philosophy major preferred nights at home chatting or watching TV with friends. His family in West Virginia is working-class, and he worked a number of service jobs in high school and college with stints as a pizza delivery boy and camp counselor.

Since at least 2018, local university students have bought drugs from Frasier, who they called “The Barber,” according to the detention order. The nickname emerged from his day job at The Lyon’s Den Barbershop and Hair Salon on Morehead Avenue in Durham, which has closed.

The detention order states that Burton contacted Frasier after a party at UNC, intending to purchase cocaine. At around 4:30 a.m. on March 9, surveillance footage shows a blue Toyota Rav4 pull up next to Kilgo dorm. Rowland told authorities that Frasier was the driver, and investigators recognized the car as his girlfriend’s.

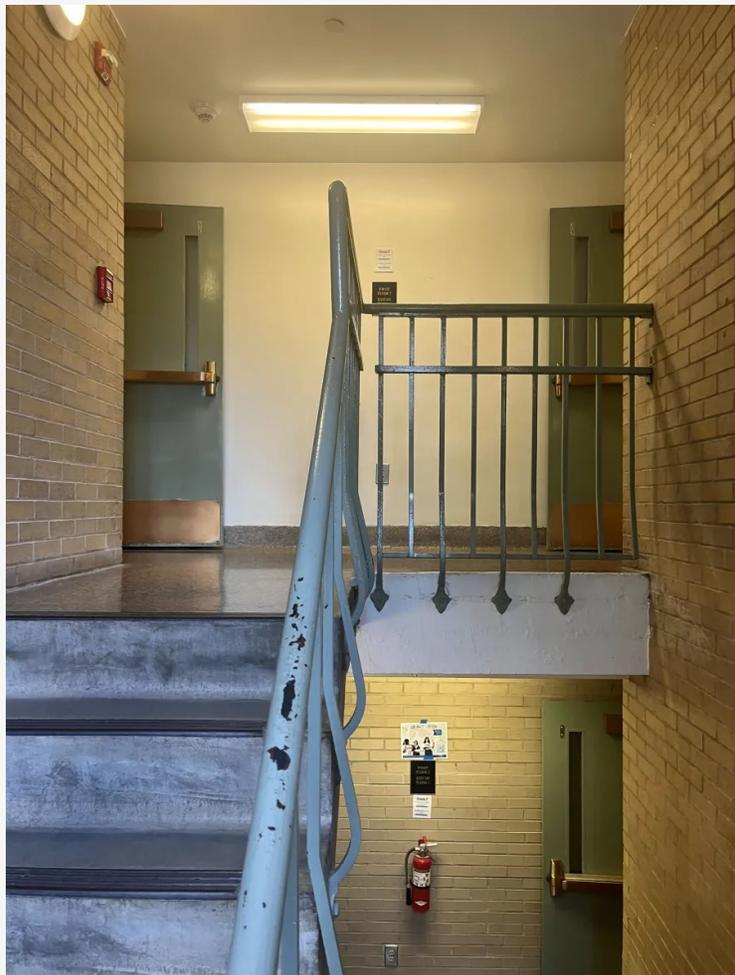
Rowland and Burton walked in the dark to the car, climbed in, and minutes later, stepped out.

Less than an hour later, Burton's legs began to fail her. She teetered back and forth until she and Rowland plopped onto a bench. Burton soon fell asleep.

Rowland, loopy himself but conscious, phoned Frasier. The blue Toyota returned to the dorm at around 5:45 a.m., but this time, Frasier jumped out. He found Burton draped over a bench outside of Kilgo with Rowland by her side, and carried her body inside the dorm, up a stairway, and into Rowland's room, according to the detention order.

After 6:15 a.m., a Duke student who lived down the hall says he awoke to a knock on his door. He opened it to find Rowland trembling as he explained what had happened. The student asked not to be named to discuss a sensitive matter.

The student went to Rowland's room, where he said he saw Burton, her skin drained of color and barely breathing. Her eyes stayed shut but her mouth had dropped open. Rowland and his roommate were in the room.



The residence hall where Elizabeth Grace Burton was found.
(Charlotte Kramon for *The Assembly*)



The student called 911. The person on the line, who was on speaker phone, instructed them to move Burton on her side and take her pulse. The student described where paramedics should come, and two arrived within about 8 minutes.

The paramedics asked which substances had been involved. Rowland mentioned cocaine, according to the student who asked not to be named. Then the paramedics shooed the students into the hallway.

A swarm of campus police officers and a team of EMS personnel arrived. Down the hall, Rowland was shaking uncontrollably. Every few minutes, he rushed to a trashcan to throw up.

Duke police executed a search warrant on the dorm room, but as of Friday afternoon, they had not filed their findings with the Durham County Clerk's Office. White powder found in Burton's phone case later tested positive for cocaine and fentanyl, court documents said.

According to [Frasier's detention order](#), when Burton was at Duke Hospital, an unidentified student called Frasier and asked if he knew Grace. Frasier said he did. The student told him Grace had died, and wanted to know what he sold her. Frasier hung up.

Another Overdose

The day before Burton was pronounced dead, another young adult died after buying drugs from Frasier, according to prosecutors.

Joshua Skip Zinner, 23, a former University of North Carolina at Wilmington student and Kappa Alpha fraternity brother living in Raleigh, had told his friends he was feeling sick and thought he had a sinus infection.

A friend tried to check on him but after a day with no response, he approached Zinner's roommate.

When the roommate opened the door to Zinner's bedroom, he saw blankets and clothes piled on the bed, according to a [report](#) by the state medical examiner's office. Scattered across the mound were two small empty plastic bags and a third filled with white powder.

E-cigarettes were strewn throughout the space, and a bottle of over-the-counter nasal spray sat on the desk near unprescribed amoxicillin and prescribed Trazadone, an antidepressant.

The roommate stepped further into the room and approached the bed. There, he found Zinner lying on his left side with his arms hanging above his head. His body was cold to the touch. Zinner was dead.

Zinner had a history of cocaine use, and had attended rehab in the past, according to the report. His stated cause of death was cocaine and fentanyl toxicity.

Text exchanges from March 4 indicate that Zinner purchased 2 grams of cocaine for \$168 from Frasier, according to a court record. Weeks earlier, Zinner had sent \$165 to Frasier's wife, Keitra, on Cash App. His roommate told investigators that the transaction was also a cocaine purchase.

According to prosecutors, Frasier was married but also had a girlfriend.

Frasier and his girlfriend, Allen, were later charged in connection with Zinner's death. Federal prosecutors have not explained why Frasier has been charged in Zinner's death but not in Burton's.

Zinner wrestled at Raleigh's Broughton High School, played club soccer, and worked at Oakwood Pizza Box. He was an avid Carolina Hurricanes hockey fan who attended games with his father and sisters.

"Those who knew him will be forever changed by his infectious personality, compassionate heart, and giving nature," said his [obituary](#). "A natural organizer of events and people, if there was fun to be had, you'd find Josh showing the way."

\$12,000 in Cash

Frasier did not always conduct business on his own, a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration investigation into Frasier found. Sometimes, Allen delivered to his customers while Frasier communicated her whereabouts by text.

On March 15, Allen drove her blue Toyota down the rocky hill that descends into the barber shop's dirt parking lot at 4:45 p.m., according to Frasier's detention order. She immediately turned around and exited, parking a block away.

She waited for about 15 minutes until Frasier walked out of the shop sporting a black backpack and slumped into the passenger seat. Then police surrounded the car.

Frasier shoved the backpack toward Allen, burst out of the vehicle, and threw a cell phone beneath the car just before he was handcuffed. Officers then arrested Allen. A search of the car turned up a Glock .45 caliber handgun under the driver's seat.

Inside Frasier's backpack, they found 7 grams of fentanyl, plastic bags of cocaine, a digital scale, and "additional drug paraphernalia," according to the detention order. They also found \$12,000 in cash.

Frasier has been entangled with the law over a number of matters over the last 15 years, including possession of illegal substances. In 2014, he was convicted on two counts with intent to manufacture, deliver, and sell a controlled substance, and put on probation until 2016.

Frasier and Allen were both indicted on March 28 on four counts by a grand jury for the Middle District of North Carolina, including conspiracy to distribute cocaine. The court also added two new charges from March: possession with intent to distribute fentanyl while in possession of a firearm.

On August 28, the grand jury added a second superseding indictment alleging drug distribution by Frasier and Allen caused Zinner's death, which could result in a minimum sentence of five to 20 years. The pair has pleaded not guilty to all charges. Their attorneys declined comment.

Even though Allen and Frasier are being tried together, Allen's lawyer has **motioned** to prohibit the government from introducing evidence of drug overdoses from her case. They said Allen was not present during the deals that lead to both deaths. Their trial is set for November 13.



Joshua Skip Zinner, 23, who also died in March. (Photo illustration by Taylor Le for *The Assembly*)

Rowland Pleads Guilty To Drug Charges

Rowland also faces federal charges, but not for Burton's death. Federal prosecutors filed charges against him on June 2 for unlawfully using his cell phone to facilitate the distribution of marijuana and cocaine.

When Rowland consented to have his phone searched, authorities found 1,140 text exchanges with Frasier, according to investigators.

Rowland was accused of buying and supplying cocaine and marijuana to other students over a period of about seven months, from September 2022 to March 2023. In total, Rowland purchased 7.5 grams of cocaine and 29 ounces of marijuana from Frasier, according to court records.

Rowland **pleaded guilty** on June 8. The court set his sentencing for September 22 with a \$50,000 unsecured bond. But the hearing has been postponed until December 12 after the Burtons' attorney filed a motion under the Crime Victim's Rights Act to establish themselves as victims in the case.



The campus of Duke University in Durham. (Kate Sheppard for *The Assembly*)

If they are designated as victims, prosecutors would be required to notify the family of hearings and enable them to make impact statements, which a judge could consider in sentencing. A hearing on the motion is scheduled for October 18.

Under the plea bargain, Rowland faces up to four years in prison and \$250,000 in fines.

Adkins, the lawyer for the Burton family, said the family approached local prosecutors in Durham about bringing charges against Rowland and Frasier in Burton's death. But Adkins said Duke police had not thoroughly investigated, making it difficult for prosecutors to bring charges.

The North Carolina Medical Examiner's autopsy conducted by Dr. Kimberly Janssen was "botched," Adkins said, because it left out key substances that contributed to Burton's death.

Adkins alleges that the autopsy relied on the blood drawn by Duke University Hospital at 8:02 a.m. on March 9, before Burton was declared dead. He said the results would have been more accurate if blood had been drawn after her death.

Even though fentanyl was detected in Burton's urine sample taken at the same time, fentanyl was not listed as a contributor to Burton's death.

Janssen concluded that Burton died of ethanol and cocaine toxicity. Her blood alcohol level was 0.189, more than twice the legal limit for driving. Janssen did not respond to requests for comment.

The Burton family hired a private pathologist, Dr. Robert E. Thomas Jr. of York Pathology Associates, to conduct an autopsy and toxicology report. His report found fentanyl, norfentanyl, and GHB, in addition to alcohol and cocaine, and concluded that Burton died of a "multidrug overdose."

No Standard Policy

The last known on-campus death at Duke occurred in November 2021. A man, who was not a student, was found dead near a building across from the Kilgo residence hall. *Duke Today* **reported** the incident later that day, but most students found out via word of mouth.

Duke said it communicates publicly when one of its own students passes away, but the university's response varies when a visitor dies.

"In this particular case, the student who passed away was a member of the UNC community, and therefore, communications regarding her death were handled by UNC," Frank Tramble, Duke's vice president for communications, said in an email statement.

Duke declined to comment on Rowland leaving the university, citing federal privacy laws that govern universities.





Duke University's Kilgo quad residences, where Elizabeth Grace Burton was found. (Kate Sheppard for *The Assembly*)

UNC did not announce the death either. According to UNC's [Student Death Protocol](#), campus police only send out an alert if there is a threat to others on campus, but will exclude the cause of death.

"These messages can be triggering for members of our community and are often more harmful than helpful," Chloe McCotter, the media relations manager for the university, said in an email.

UNC-CH "respects the privacy of the deceased student's family and takes into consideration their wishes regarding notification of family/friends and their desire to make difficult personal decisions about any public announcement," she wrote.

There is no standard policy for how universities handle deaths. Simon Barker, a higher education consultant, said universities often don't announce overdoses. An institution's primary responsibility is communicating with the family of the deceased, he said, particularly as overdoses are [soaring](#) and most of the resulting deaths involve fentanyl.

"It's an epidemic and it's occurring all the time," he said. "I think that sensitivity is important."

At UNC, a group of students hand out free naloxone, and show people how to administer it. The group didn't know about Burton's death until another student told them, said Caroline Clodfelter, who has been involved with the group.

Clodfelter added that fraternities have also reached out about resources and training sessions.

Reece MacKinney, a student involved with the Drug Overdose Prevention and Education Project (DOPE) at Duke, said the university seems to be in favor of expanding access to Narcan, but bureaucratic and legal hurdles have slowed things down.

Students can get Narcan from the campus pharmacy for free with Duke health insurance, and DOPE has been training students and social organizations in its administration.

'One of the Sweetest People'

Rose Shaffer met Grace Burton on the kindergarten playground at Cotswold, a neighborhood in southeast Charlotte. They went to separate middle schools, but their bond remained strong.

"She was always just one of the sweetest people ever known," said Shaffer, now a cosmetology student. She considered Burton, known as "Gracie" or "Liz," a dear friend.

Burton loved academics, Shaffer said. Her LinkedIn page said she founded a group called Books For Babies and spoke Mandarin. She described herself as "Caffeinated, driven, and devotee of absolute responsibility."

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— Frank Tramble, vice president for communications at Duke

Shaffer was at her boyfriend's house when her mother called to tell her that Gracie had died.

Shaffer was overcome with emotion—and questions. She said Burton had "experimented" with cocaine in high school, and that it's a common drug at UNC's fraternity parties.

Some Facebook posts claimed Burton died in a car wreck; a **Twitter** account and **YouTube** channel repeated that story. Eventually, rumors of laced cocaine reached Shaffer, but the speculation only heightened her confusion.

More information is unlikely to come from Burton's sorority sisters. The chapter president and other officers did not respond to messages seeking comment.

In a **statement** released the day she died, her sorority said it was grieving her death.

"Grace had the best smile and attitude," a close friend said in the statement. "She was hilarious and didn't fail to make anyone laugh. But most importantly, she was intentional. Grace loved being a ZTA."

Clarification: *This article has been updated to note that The Lyon's Den Barbershop and Hair Salon has closed.*

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