

Back at college, suspect called Boston bombs "crazy": classmate

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/22/us-usa-explosions-boston-college-idUSBRE93K0FV20130422>

April 22, 2013

By Mary Ellen Clark

A photograph of Djohar Tsarnaev, who is believed to be Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombing, is seen on his page of Russian social networking site Vkontakte (VK), as pictured on a monitor and a mobile phone in St. Petersburg April 19, 2013.

Credit: Reuters/Alexander Demianchuk

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DARTMOUTH, Massachusetts |
Sun Apr 21, 2013 8:41pm EDT



DARTMOUTH, Massachusetts (Reuters) - Working out at the gym at their sleepy New England college, two students chatted about how "crazy" it was that bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon. Three days later, one of them was named a prime suspect.

Returning to campus on Sunday after being evacuated on Friday during a massive manhunt for the bombers, students at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth swapped recollections of seeing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, 19, back in the dorm, at class and in the gym in the aftermath of the bombings.

Tsarnaev was working out in the gym from 8 to 10 p.m. on Tuesday, listening to music on his iPod, when he struck up a conversation with fellow sophomore Zach Bettencourt.

"It's crazy this is happening now," Bettencourt recalled Tsarnaev telling him when the bombings came up. "This (these bombings) is so easy to do. These tragedies happen all the time in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Reuters was unable to confirm the conversation with Tsarnaev, who was hospitalized, unable to speak and does not yet have a lawyer.

Two homemade bombs stuffed into pressure cookers exploded near the race finish line on Monday, killing three people and injuring more than 170 others.

Three days after the explosions, the FBI circulated photographs of Tsarnaev and his older brother, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, with a plea to the public for information leading to the capture of the then-unidentified suspects.

The pictures flashed onto a television screen being watched by a group of students at Tsarnaev's

dorm, Pine Dale Hall, and they were stunned to realize one of the suspects might be Tsarnaev.

"We all thought it looked like him," said Bettencourt, 20, of Gloucester, Massachusetts. "We didn't believe it was him."

The group of students wondered aloud if they should walk downstairs and knock on Tsarnaev's dorm room door.

"What if he had a gun?" Bettencourt said.

A school spokesman declined to say whether at that point on Thursday Tsarnaev was still on campus, about 60 miles south of Boston.

What is known is that on Thursday night into Friday, the ethnic Chechen brothers, who were already the most sought-after suspects in the world, took off on a crime spree that left an MIT police officer dead, a Boston transit police officer critically injured and the city of Boston and its suburbs locked down for a day-long dragnet.

Late on Friday, after a shootout with police, a bleeding Tsarnaev was captured and rushed to the hospital in serious condition while his older brother, who the FBI had previously interviewed over suspicions he was a possible Islamist radical, lay dead.

"The word that I've heard everybody use is 'surreal'," said a college official helping students settle back onto the leafy campus of 9,400 students.

"It's one of those things where you see people committing an alleged crime on stage with cameras from around the world focused on them and a lot of the students just can't believe their eyes," the official said.

Students were stunned to learn that the teen they knew as a friendly, pot-smoking transfer student from the UMass Boston, who took easy courses and got middling grades, eluded an army of law enforcement officers to become the most hunted man in the country.

At a campus event hosted by school administrators on Sunday, students said that minutes after Tsarnaev's name was released, word spread like wildfire through campus.

"It's shocking that someone like this was part of our community," said Colin Murphy, a junior. "It's terrible to be in the national spotlight for something so negative. But that sense of community was much stronger and outstripped any negativity."

Around school, Tsarnaev was known as a guy who loved soccer and brushed off invitations to join the Muslim Student Association on campus, according to its president, Ahmad Nassri.

"I was trying to pull him into the group," Nassri said. "He didn't really want it. I think he attended one meeting. He defined himself as a Muslim but if you asked him if he was religious he would say, 'No.'"

Bettencourt said he had found disturbing the casual way Tsarnaev chatted about the bombings during his gym workout.

"I don't know how he talked about it. I don't know what was going on in his head," Bettencourt said. "I was driving here and thinking 'Wow, he actually did it.'"

(Editing by Barbara Goldberg,; Paul Thomasch and Sandra Maler)

