



Baldwin Wallace University students arrested for reportedly operating drug lab

By Karen Farkas, The Plain Dealer

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BEREA, Ohio — Four students from the **Baldwin Wallace University** Conservatory of Music led dual lives -- successfully pursuing studies in voice, piano and violin while operating clandestine drug labs to manufacture the illegal drug Ecstasy, officials say.

Benjamin Knight, 24, Lauren Pajerski, 22, Max Cickovskis, 22, and Jonathan Beckwith, 23, were indicted Nov. 16 on numerous charges, including assembly or possession of chemicals for the manufacture of drugs and cultivating marijuana. Knight and Pajerski were also charged with theft and burglary.



Lauren Pajerski

Berea police

Public records and interviews with police are filling in details of an unusual drug case that made news with the arrest of the students last month.

"I am just grateful nothing blew up and no one got hurt," said Berea police Detective Dennis Bort, the lead investigator who spent months gathering evidence. "The moral of this case is book-smart, street-stupid."

All four students are under interim suspension, said university spokesman George Richard.

"Sad, disappointing, tragic," he said in describing campus reaction to the charges.

Attorneys for Knight, Pajerski and Cickovskis declined to comment. No attorney was listed in court files for Beckwith.

Knight, of Madison, and Beckwith, of Oakley, Mich., were among 12 keyboard students who received scholarships this year, according to an



Oct. 6 keyboard concert program. Cickovskis, who gave his address as Front Street in Berea, sang bass with the BW Singers in the Oct. 5 Choral Gala. Pajerski, of Broadview Heights, played in the 2012 Bach Festival in April.



Bort called them typical "suburban kids with silver spoons. ... They were good students."

The case against them began building May 17, when a BW chemistry professor discovered his master key to Wilker/Telfer Hall had been stolen from his key ring, which he had left unattended for about 15 minutes in a lab room. He later told Berea police that he had seen Pajerski, a violin performance/chemistry major, and a man looking in the room earlier that day. It was unusual to see students because it was summer break.

College security officials immediately changed all the exterior locks to the building.

At 11:30 p.m. on May 18 a BW security officer saw a man and woman, both dressed in black and wearing black face masks, in that same lab room.

"They had boxed up chemicals and equipment and had other lab equipment running," Bort said. "When [the security guard] walked in, they ran out."

Police later identified the two as Pajerski and Knight. Bort said the pair fled to Findley Hall, where they ran into Beckwith, one of a small number of summer students living there. The pair told Beckwith that they had broken into the lab and were hiding from the police, Bort said.



Beckwith did not tell officials, Bort said, and is accused of helping set up a lab in an empty dorm room that night to cook a batch of Ecstasy.

Ecstasy is a slang term for methylene dioxy methamphetamine, or MDMA, which combines a powerful stimulant with a hallucinogen. MDMA is chemically similar to methamphetamine.

Bort said labs used to produce Ecstasy are less prevalent than meth labs because the process for making it is more technical. Processing both drugs is extremely hazardous, and labs can explode, spewing dangerous chemicals, he said.

Authorities did not know initially what the stolen goods were intended for. Bort investigated the case throughout the summer to determine who was involved and why they wanted chemicals and equipment. The case took time

because Bort had to go to cellular service providers to obtain the students' text messages, which outlined the drug-making plans, he said.

Bort said the students texted one another about ordering specific chemicals and equipment and how they should not order everything from the same place using the same name to avoid attracting attention from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

To figure out what drugs the students might be making, Bort sent a list of the chemicals -- found on a note at the scene of the break-in -- to the state Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which told him the ingredients were for Ecstasy.

Knight and Pajerski had sent text messages about planning the lab break-in, including what equipment they needed and how Pajerski should leave a window open on the ground-floor level to gain access, Bort said.

"Some of the messages were pretty funny," Bort said. "He said he had a really sweet hat for [the break-in] and she said a fedora is not B-and-E [breaking and entering] wear."

Information from text messages indicated the students cooked drugs in the garage at Knight's home in Madison on June 12, in the same vacant dorm room in Findley Hall on June 20 and in a condominium at Geneva-on-the-Lake on June 22, Bort said.

Items taken from their rental home on Front Street when they were arrested on Oct. 19 included chemicals and equipment used to make hallucinogenic mushrooms and Ecstasy.

"They were fairly diversified," Bort said. "She had the technical knowledge to set it up, and Ben handled the logistics of acquiring. Max seems to be more sales-oriented."

The investigation is still under way to determine who was buying the drugs, Bort said.

Knight, Pajerski and Cickovskis did not appear to understand the magnitude of the trouble they were in when police arrested them, Bort said.

"We took their computers, which they used to order equipment and chemicals, and one asked, 'When can I get my computer back? I have a thesis due,' " he said. "They didn't understand they were not likely getting it back nor were they likely to be in school."

The three spent a weekend in jail, and Knight attended classes the following week until he was suspended, Bort said. Beckwith was not arrested at that time and was directly indicted.

The four are scheduled to be arraigned in Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court on Dec. 4. If convicted, they could face mandatory prison time because any drug activity at the residence hall and Front Street home were within 1,000 feet of Berea High School and St. Adalbert Elementary School.

Much of the case will be based on the text messages.

"Basically it amounts to a written confession," Bort said of the numerous texts. "I love texting. It's the best thing that ever happened to me."

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