

Roommates remember Parente as bigger than life

A message flashed across the screen of Julieanne Malley's cell phone late last week. All she saw was that the sender was "Stephanie"

"My heart stopped," said Ms. Malley, a sophomore at Loyola College in Maryland, April 24.

The message was from roommate Stephanie Nguyen.

"Part of me wanted it to be Stephanie Parente," Ms. Malley said of the heart-sinking moment when she realized it couldn't be "Little Steph."

Five days before Ms. Malley talked with The Catholic Review, Ms. Parente, a 19-year-old Loyola sophomore, was killed along with her mother and sister by her 59-year-old father, William Parente. He then took his own life in the family's Towson hotel room.

Mr. Parente had come to visit his daughter in the Baltimore area with his wife, Betty, 58, and other daughter Catherine, 11. They regularly visited Ms. Parente at Loyola.

Everything seemed normal. April 19 changed everything.

By April 20, staff at the Towson Sheraton discovered the family. The three women had been killed by blunt-force trauma and asphyxiation, according to Baltimore County police. Mr. Parente is believed to have cut himself with a knife. He reportedly battled depression and was having financial problems, according to the police.

A funeral Mass was to be celebrated April 28 for Ms. Parente, her mother and sister at St. Joseph Catholic Church in their hometown of Garden City, N.Y.

A separate ceremony was to be held for Mr. Parente.

Ms. Parente lived in Loyola's Newman Towers East apartments with Ms. Malley, Ms. Nguyen and fellow sophomores Lauren Gallinari and Danielle Scorrano. Known as "Little Steph" for her diminutive size, Ms. Parente playfully argued that she was 5-foot-3. Her roommates countered she was three inches shorter.

"Little Steph was such a presence that not having her in our apartment is unfathomable," Ms. Gallinari said. "We're getting through it."

The Loyola campus is still coming to terms with Ms. Parente's death, which became national news along with another murder-suicide days before that involved parishioners of Holy Family in Middletown.

Several candlelight vigils, Masses and memorial services were held at Loyola in the week following Ms. Parente's death. Students showed up by the hundreds to mourn and celebrate Ms. Parente.

Jesuit Father Brian Linnane, Loyola's president, called the death "a moment of unimaginable sorrow for the entire Loyola family. The loss of young lives - particularly under such circumstances - defies understanding."

The roommates say they were inseparable on Loyola's campus. They knew each other's class schedules. Ms. Scorrano added students would often walk up to them and say, "You guys are always together."

"Even now," Ms. Scorrano said, "we're together. Not having (Ms. Parente) here, there's a huge hole."

Ms. Parente had an infectious personality, her friends said, and just wanted to make people smile. Ms. Nguyen was also Ms. Parente's freshman-year roommate. The two talked on the phone during the previous summer and anticipated many jokes about "the two Steps."

When they moved onto campus, Ms. Parente came dancing into their room with her little sister. Ms. Nguyen was instantly won over.

"She was just really engaging," she said. "She could make you feel like you were the only person here. Stephanie had the best stories."

Ms. Parente had her eye on the future. A member of the men's and women's rowing team, the speech pathology major planned to study in England in the fall and eventually wanted to become a dentist.

"She used to say, 'I might as well live life now because after college my life is going to (stink),' " Ms. Gallinari said of Ms. Parente's love of college life.

Her roommates said she would come back from early morning rowing practices soaked and not complain.

"She lived the life she definitely wanted to live and always had fun with whatever she was doing," Ms. Malley said. "She knew medical school was ahead of her."

The roommates fill their sudden void by making photo collages of "Little Steph." They watched her favorite movie, "Annapolis," recently in a public gathering area. Other students joined in, making it yet another memorial to Ms. Parente.

"Loyola has been amazing," Ms. Gallinari said. "They're constantly making sure we're OK. Just having that Jesuit support has been incredible."

The end of the semester is fast approaching. The roommates know they may see each other less during the summer. There will be nights where they will sit in their rooms and think about "Little Steph."

In those quiet moments, they know tears will come.

"We have become family," Ms. Nguyen said. "She was a huge part of our being."