

RISD Owes Student \$2.5M Over Study-Abroad Attack

By **Cara Salvatore**

Law360 (February 2, 2021, 7:48 PM EST) -- The Rhode Island School of Design owes more than \$2.5 million to a woman who was raped because students could not lock their rooms at a study-abroad program, a federal judge ruled Tuesday following a bench trial.

U.S. District Judge John McConnell Jr. said RISD caused "intense" and ongoing suffering to the student, identified as Jane Doe, through its failure to arrange safe housing for a three-week program in Ireland in June and July 2016.

The night the students arrived, another student in the program made unwanted advances toward Doe and was rejected, then later entered her room and raped her, the judge said.

RISD was well aware of the dangers of the door-locking situation because of a nearly identical incident at a program in Rome three years earlier, the judge found.

"RISD knew that students placed in mixed-gender housing were at increased risk of sexual assault, and how critical lockable doors might be for their safety and security," the judge said. "The rape was a direct and proximate result of the negligence of RISD and its officials."

And yet RISD included no safety mandate in its contract with the housing provider, another art college, the judge said. RISD also shirked its obligation to do a safety inspection on arrival, according to the ruling.

The other school, Burren College of Art, which is not a party to the suit, provided four-bedroom houses. The individual bedrooms had keys, but those keys were kept on a window ledge in a boiler room and students weren't told about them.

The morning after the rape, Doe reported it to program staff. Her next days were spent going to the hospital and seeing doctors, according to trial testimony quoted by the judge.

Based on trial evidence, Doe will continue to experience "problems in her day-to-day functioning — affecting her relationships, forcing her to regularly cope with reminders, and surfacing trauma when she discusses the rape itself. Some of these symptoms may never go away," the judge said.

RISD's immediate response to the rape was adequate, the judge said. It eventually ejected the perpetrator from the program.

Doe's lawyers, David Williams and Nadeem Bezar, said via email Tuesday that the ruling acknowledged "RISD's basic and straightforward responsibilities to its study abroad students, and RISD's failure to meet the minimum obligations parents expect of colleges and universities when their children enroll."

Interest will eventually be added to the \$2.5 million in compensatory damages.

A representative for RISD was not immediately available for comment.

Doe is represented by David Williams and Nadeem Bezar of Kline & Specter PC.

RISD is represented by Steven Richard of Nixon Peabody LLP.

The case is Doe v. Rhode Island School of Design, case number 1:18-cv-00010, in the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island.

--Editing by Adam LoBelia.