

Interview with Sean O'Brien  
February 4, 2011  
Marquette, MI  
Subject: Security Event at NMU on Feb 2, 2011

#### START OF INTERVIEW

MAGNAGHI, RUSSELL (RMM): Interview with Sean O'Brien. Marquette, Michigan, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Okay, the nature of the interview is dealing with the, uh, what, security problem we had with Northern, what was it security problem?

O'BRIEN, SEAN (SO): Threat, maybe?

RMM: Threat, I guess. Yeah. Security threat at Northern on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Wednesday, and uh, I'm interviewing Sean because he seems to be aware of the details and how to get the information off the Internet, etc., etc. So he's a good person to provide us with some insights. So, Sean, could you tell us a little about yourself in terms of your student, how long have you been at Northern, and give us a little background.

SO: Absolutely, I'm a history student here at the University. I came in 2007 from Marine City, Michigan. And, uh, I'm married, I've lived in an on-campus apartment ever since I've arrived here, and I've worked with almost every history professor, um, to continue this work, to hopefully be a professor myself one day.

RMM: Okay, and, uh, could you give us maybe some background, as I said you're kind of, what would I say, more aware of what happened, more focused on what's happened or at least you seem to have an interest in it. I don't know what way to put it, but anyway, you're a good person to be doing this, this interview. Could you give us some idea of your interest, not so much interest, but concern of what happened?

SO: Well, it's not every day you get to be a part of history, I mean, interesting history. Not where there's dynamics happening. And situations like this from what I've read before can change a University and can change the life of the students living there. And so I think that this is, in some ways, one of the potential turning points at Northern. Luckily, nothing terrible happened on that day. If it did, it would probably be quite different already. There's already some changes I think going on, but nothing too drastic. It's more just a feeling at this point. I guess I've always been a little interested in security itself and how this University conducts its business and how it can always improve itself.

RMM: And I think just to add to the record, earlier in the day, you had put together that announcement, that we had talked about yesterday, about possibly bringing other students across campus. A lot of them hopefully, that would respond, but then we found that we might be wise to get it cleared through the President and the President's Office. Then I found that there are only three people on campus that could allow such a message to go out. So, I guess you could say that at this point there are some changes.

SO: Yeah.

RMM: Subtle changes, but the average person doesn't realize that. But you can't just send a message out to everybody, it's not going to happen.

SO: Absolutely, and along with that announcement, I put together a collection of Internet articles and Facebook postings and various postings across the Internet, a couple of blog entries that are all connected to the event. And including a copy of what is supposedly the original blog post of the one who threatened the University. So, we will have this on file hopefully in the Archives, along with whatever records we get from students and as more information comes to light.

RMM: Alright, okay. So, could you tell us, how, tell us about your day, uh, the beginnings of February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

SO: Well, it started fairly normal. My wife begins class at 10:00, and I begin work here in Cohodas as the History/Economics/Philosophy/ and Poli. Sci. student secretary at 8:00. So, I get up before her and I grabbed everything and came into the office, started wishing for a snow day, because it was colder that day but it didn't do us any good. I got in right around 8:00, and Lara Clisch, the other secretary, had already opened and the day was beginning. Got sat down at the desk, got everything started, it was fairly simple. We made a couple of jokes about wanting a snow day. And then she gets a phone call, she always gets phone calls, I didn't think anything of it.

RMM: So this is about what time?

SO: This was about, between 8:10 and 8:15, I think. And she got this phone call, and she sounded a little anxious on the phone, but I didn't think anything of it, could have been friends, family, whatever. And then she asks me, as soon as she gets off the phone, to help her out by going across the hall and locking all the doors, and telling professors to lock their offices, to stay inside. And we're not to permit anyone in the building. And she said, "We're going into lockdown mode." She didn't really give me much more details than that at that point. I didn't really feel like I needed them. And when I went across the hall, I encountered Dr. McDonnell, Gary McDonnell, and told him what was up. So he went in his office, shut it, I shut the doors over there, turned off the lights, came back, sat down. That took me maybe five minutes, because, trying to find Gary, after I sat down, back in the office, about five minutes later, now we're talking 8:15, 8:20, Lara gets another call. It's very hurried. When she gets off the phone, she says, "Alright, Sean, we are evacuating Cohodas. We need to tell everybody to get out of the building, there's been a threat on the President." And she found this out from Carol Bergmann, I believe her name is...

RMM: Yeah, the President's Office.

SO: And she was informed, so suddenly we're shutting everything down. And then Dr. Kendall comes out of his office, and I believe Dr. Willis was there as well, and they're discussing, so this is an actual threat then, that we're taking seriously. And so Lara said, "Yes, we're supposed to be getting out." So she grabbed her things, and told me to grab my things, and I get packed up to leave. At this point, I think it's important to note that the NMU Official Emergency Alert didn't go online. They had given the word that they were shutting down the office, but they didn't tell the whole campus what was going on. Dr. Kendall wanted to wait back until he got the actual emergency alert, because he didn't want to leave campus and then have classes actually supposed to happen, because they were cancelled in this

message. So Lara leaves, and I stay back talking to Dr. Kendall for a moment, and then Dr. Tony Aumann, Philosophy professor, comes in and we're discussing things for a moment. It seems Tony was going to head over to Jamrich before leaving the University to make sure his students know to not come to class or to not show up. I guess he did so without incident. I found out after the fact. I was sitting there with Tony and Keith and this was only a few moments, we're talking a handful of minutes, the phone rings and it's Zac Cogley wanting to double check the actual announcement, there's not been an official alert. And Tony had informed him and an unknown woman had informed Tony. So, I confirmed it for Zac and he asked why I was still there, if we were abandoning ship. Someone had to answer the phones. So, we got that taken care of, and I left. As soon as I got outside of Cohodas, I decided to call Dr. Dave Logan, because I had his number, and I know he's about 40 minutes out, towards Gwinn, and it's kind of a long drive to have to come in and have to be locked down. So I called him to let him know what was going on. We talked for a few minutes on my walk home, I live in the on-campus apartments on Summit Street, so it's maybe a five minute walk with the snow drifts, and I'm already noticing at this point as I'm outside, Cohodas is just being flooded out. There's people running everywhere, getting into their cars. And there were quite a few people running into the building, because they had either forgotten things or were just arriving. The University isn't entirely active at 8:00. I also noticed Hedgecock, too, was going quickly, rather quickly, everyone was emptying out of there. And a student ran by me a little panicked, and at that moment, as the student ran by me panicked, my friend had texted me, having received the NMU Emergency Alert text. This was, his text had arrived to me at 8:38. I wasn't signed up for the text messages, but as I asked other people, their texts all arrived within 8:35 to 8:38. And kind of thinking about it, they made the decision to close campus around 8:20, and it took them nearly 20 minutes to get an alert out. But by the time the alert went out, Cohodas was fairly emptied. It's come to my knowledge in the days after this event, that not all the personnel in Cohodas was notified. This doesn't seem to have been an error in the President's Office, because from what I understand they did contact people and then these people are supposed to contact other people. Somewhere along the line, someone decided not to check everywhere or not to notify certain people, and so they were left in the building until the Emergency Alert.

RMM: So probably the old fashioned fire alarm would have worked best?

SO: That would have gotten people out quicker and would have alerted everyone, and then we would have had people in a group to tell them to leave. The other thing I think the University probably should have done, but they may have done this at a later time, is probably a Public Safety officer, send them on a sweep through the building to notify everyone as well. Keep things organized.

RMM: So you think there were people, even though you had left, and people were leaving the building, there were still some people who didn't know it?

SO: Yes, as I came back to work on Thursday, the day after the events, I talked to some individuals who have asked not to be named, because they don't want the University to be mad at them, and they weren't notified until the Emergency Alert. So, the building was emptied, everyone was told to get out of the building, and then 20 minutes later, they're notified, "Oh, we're not supposed to be here." I got home without incident, and I woke my wife up because she was just about getting ready to get up for class.

RMM: Oh, so she hadn't come, she wasn't on campus, so you didn't have to worry about her.

SO: Absolutely. That's one thing that encouraged me to go ahead and go home and not stick around for the Emergency Alert. And she was asleep, she didn't quite understand, or she thought I was joking at first, then we talked about it, Emergency Alerts were on our computers, and uh, then it started coming to contacting friends around the campus that would know sort of what I knew, that there wasn't an armed gunman running around on campus, that there wasn't bombs, and there wasn't a hostage situation. All of these sorts of rumors kept coming up and being thrown around, especially online.

RMM: Ok, let me just interject here, when that happened, and I think through the day, and into the evening news, it was never clearly identified by the University as to what the nature of the threat was.

SO: Right.

RMM: I remember hearing that and then there was certain things that were said that led me to believe that it was probably a gunman and it wasn't a bomb or something. Though I did hear one rumor that was going around, somebody was saying there was a bomb that was going to take out the entire campus. Then somebody else said it would be an atomic device.

SO: Yeah.

RMM: And that was kind of some of the rumors that got going, that weren't based on anything.

SO: Well, an interesting aspect of this whole event for me was being involved on Facebook. For this, and getting my friend's messages and then getting messages back out and forth. It was very fluid contact between everybody. Normally when you're in this situation, you're cut off from everybody, ideally, and you're in your own little room, out of contact, hoping something comes across on the news. With this everyone was talking, and then everyone was getting online trying to figure out what was going on because the University was very quiet about what was happening. Nearly everyone I had talked to had received an Emergency Alert, including myself as I read the Emergency Alert online, made it sound as if there was a crisis, on campus, at that moment.

RMM: You're talking about the Emergency Alert that was the red bar that came out.

SO: There was a red bar on the screen, it was an email that got sent out to all personnel and students and it was a text message. This scared people. Dr. Ruuska, from the Anthropology department had her class that started at 8:00 and I talked with her a little bit about this. She was teaching when this happened. And her phone and most of the class's phones all started to all vibrate at the same time. And, normally at that point, it's not kind of like what student is using their phone, it's uh-oh, and so they check it and everyone starting piling out. While I was in the office here, and, um, I made a mistake earlier, I said it was Dr. Willis, it was Dr. Pruschetko that was here with Dr. Kendall and I before Tony Aumann came in. Dr. Pruschetko had called over to the music department to ask if they had been notified if classes were cancelled, this was about 8:20-8:25, before I'd left the building. They were uninformed. They had no idea. Cohodas was supposed to be emptying, and none of the other campus knew yet, not even the personnel. I think Hedgecock might have known – some personnel in Hedgecock. In these early few hours of the day, we were trying to figure out what was going on, NMU was releasing a few quiet reports saying classes were cancelled, to stay in your dorms, to stay in your campus apartments. My friend, who lives in the Summit Apartments as well, but in a different section than I am, his CA, the community advisor, told them that we were in lock-down mode, we were not supposed to leave our apartments, we were not supposed to go outside for any reason. My CA did not

inform us of this, she did not email us until much later in the evening. Whether she didn't get the information, or that was a decision the other CA made, I don't know. So, we stayed in most of the day, and kind of tracked it online as articles popped up. Marquette High School closed down, Northstar Academy, sort of an alternative high school, closed down, the rumors among those students at least was that there was a bomb in their building, one of the high schools. But they were panicking, as well as being sent home. Northern had broken its protocol in this situation of lock-down, stay where you are, get the offices closed, get the classrooms closed. This put everybody out in the open. And as I did some research to compile for the Archives here, it shed some light what was actually happening potentially. I suppose we won't know really that until the FBI and such release information after this. But, um, so I did some research throughout the day, and I guess I can talk about that in a few moments. But, uh, nothing was happening, it was very quiet. Eventually, they opened up the diners because they had to feed the students. The Marketplace, which is down campus towards like Halverson/Payne area and The Den, which is near up West Hall and Spooner Hall, these eateries were opened and student workers who were scheduled to work regular hours were asked to come in or expected to come in. I don't think it was too forcefully, but they were supposed to come in and work and um, then they were supposedly, I didn't get to see this myself, but from everything I've heard this is the case, there were police escorts to help students from their dorm buildings into the diners, so that they wouldn't be walking around in the open on their own. And students were to carry their identification with them, their Wildcat cards, to show that they live in this dorm and that they're supposed to get in. That's standard security protocol that they followed before in previous years, like when there's a master key that when missing, you weren't allowed in or out of the building without your ID and such. So, that wasn't too strange. One of my friends, and he hasn't officially reported this, but he did tell a public safety official, he had to work in the Den as one of the, he was dishwashing that day; he didn't want to be out in the open, in case something had happened. Um, as he was walking there to the Den, he had to leave, because he was staying at his girlfriend's, which is an on-campus apartment, so he was walking out, through sort of the art building area around Spooner over to the University Center – so kind of some back trails and some sidewalks. And, on his walk, a silver car pulls up, I believe it was a sedan, and it pulls up real slow with loud music thumping, they roll down their windows, and there's three fellows. They're wearing ski masks and have goggles on. And they stop and they stare at him. He posted this on Facebook and he talked with some people about it and he thought he was going to be shot. He thought it was over right there for him. And then they slowly peel off and go away. He's got that young person's mentality of "I don't need to report stuff to the cops, I don't talk to cops." But, when he went into the diner he did see one of the public safety officials, and he told them what went on. The public safety official asked if he wanted to report it and he said, "No." So I don't know after this point what's happened with this case, if the public safety official took care of it like he should have if they reported it, if they went out on alert for the silver car. I don't know. But there were some incidents of pranks going on throughout the day. As well as when the early evacuations came out there was a mass exodus towards Lincoln Street, and I've heard reports of a couple of car accidents because people were trying to flood out. Again, which is sort of the panic situation of evacuate, not lock-down. So, when President Les Wong, towards the evening, gave a press conference, personally, he looked frightened or sounded a little frightened, he wasn't super-confident that everything was secure. FBI were involved, and he left out the details of the nature.

RMM: I think he also had the city police.

SO: Yes, the city police were involved as well. Cindy Paavola, she released a statement to the community, which was a little weird. Maybe the reporters misquoted her, or maybe she misstated herself. She said that the University knew about this prior to 8:00 and in fact the news articles, which

some are on record in the Archive, or will be on record in the Archives, state that the University was closed prior to 8:00 because they were aware of the threat. This wasn't the case, I came to work, we were definitely open past 8:00. Not very long, but we were. She said that the threat was targeting students and faculty and um, university officials, everybody. Everybody was in danger. But, it was a threat. So, this was also released. I started collecting some articles there at that point. Later into the evening, we were unsure if evening classes were going to resume or not. They made the announcement evening classes are closed, and so we weren't sure if Thursday's classes were going to begin. But my friends and I went to Pizza Hut to eat, because we'd been cooped up all day. We were in the on-campus apartments, there were no police around, no one said "hey, don't leave campus, go back inside" or anything. They decreased the threat warning at this point. They hadn't, of course, arrested anyone. But they decreased the threat warning. So we went to Pizza Hut, we came back and we saw a couple of people walking around on campus. They freaked one of my friends out because they were walking around in the dark without a lamplight on them and she thought she had seen something long and silver in the guy's hands. Thinking it might have been a gun. I have no idea what it was, I didn't go chase him down saying "hey, what's in your hands?" But there was a feeling of being spooked, along with all layers of the University. And then that night on Facebook, there was a TV-6 Facebook listing going, where they were putting up updates and then everybody started posting on there. And some people began to post the original blog link, where the threat had come from. And it was linked back to this website called 4chan, which is sort of a depravity website online that involves photographs, videos, blog posts, jokes and it's a rough crowd on the Internet that likes to pull pranks on people. And you post anonymously. And they posted this up and some people believe that they found out where it was coming from. And then someone else posted up a link to a MySpace page for an individual in Negaunee who has some threats posted on his MySpace page, but they always sort of targeted cops and NMU officials, not NMU officials, government officials. He did not target NMU officials in any of his posts that I've seen. They posted that this was the guy, that he was an NMU student, and he claims to be an NMU student and that this was the guy behind it all. People started posting on the TV-6 page, "Oh, I know that guy. Man, he's messed up, he's not right." And so it became a corroborated story immediately. But then he posted a rebuttal blog, saying that he never targeted NMU officials. He wants to kill the president of the United States as well as cops, not NMU officials or students.

RMM: He actually put this out?

SO: Yes, and apparently Secret Service have talked to him. He talked about that, he's like "The Secret Service need to back off me and everything."

RMM: But he put this up on the day?

SO: I gave you a copy of the blog. I gave that to you yesterday, that's been removed from the Internet. That may be one of the few paper copies of that flying around. So, into the evening, announcements were made that classes would resume and no suspects were being arrested although the investigation was ongoing. So over Thursday and Friday morning here, I've been collecting further information and talking with other individuals. One of the things I wanted to do was corroborate Cindy Paavola's story of knowing about the situation prior to 8:00. I talked with one of my RA friends and she's a Resident Advisor in the dorms and she received a call between 7:00 and 7:30 alerting them that there was going to be an emergency situation on campus that day and to be on alert. I'm not sure what it all entailed. They knew prior to 8:00 before the campus really opened and began to operate. So the University was aware of this prior to 8:00, but they did begin classes and open the offices and such. I think that was a potential mistake. They may have had to take time to contact FBI and verify the situation. I think

something we can learn from is the time lapses in here. Then I continued to search it to see, I felt that the MySpace page was debunked, that this wasn't one of the real cases. So I was trying to either verify or debunk the 4chan blog post, which is also in the Archive records, a printed copy. And I found a webpage called Reddit in which people post questions for other people to interact with, and an NMU student had posted early in the day that he wanted to know where the blog was from. And students all across the country had begun replying to it and in fact one individual from California responded and his username, he didn't give his actual name, but his username is "yesthatwasme" and that he was the one who called it in, he claimed this, he said he called it in 2:00 California time, which is roughly 5:00-ish over here. He'd found it while surfing 4chan, which a lot of college kids do late at night for the humor or other depravity. So he'd called it into the hotline, and no one answered here, there he was rather quickly called back and that's when they were informed. So it was probably between 5:00 and 6-o'clock that the University began to become aware of the situation. Rumors I've heard since then and the newspaper articles have supported some of this, is that these posts were made to various universities on Wednesday, including Northern. So it was a multi-university threat. Then, that this has been an ongoing stint on 4chan over the past year or so, targeting various other universities. In the Reddit file that I have in the Archives, the archival record, it includes some links and discussions of this happening at other universities, including Missouri University, which I believe was a few days prior to the incident here at Northern. As far as I know, no one has been arrested, although there is a supposed suspect. The University has not claimed that it is from 4chan, but that seems to be the most reliable source I've seen so far. There is a buzz that there was something even more serious than this, 4chan itself is not a very serious website and most people, when they see something on there, they take it too seriously. For the University to have reacted the way it did, to that they were spooked enough to break protocol, it's led to some questions, is there something more going on? The blog post targets Lesley Wong, which corroborates what I was informed early Wednesday morning that he was one of the main targets. The poster claimed to be a young black man. The MySpace blogger, he's white, and he's talked about the racial inequalities and how they need to be fixed in this country. And then this black guy was talking on 4chan, supposedly black guy, at least, had said that he's tired of being pushed around by the people with money at this University.

RMM: At Northern?

SO: At Northern, yes. He claimed to be a Northern student. Some of the news articles reported that the poster was not from Northern. Some of the Internet leaks, I guess that have come from the administration about this have included these various postings to the multiple universities have all been from the same IP address, meaning that the Internet access point is from the very same spot. So it was one guy sending them all out, or that they're somewhere else routing their Internet through the same point. That can happen. That's kind of all of it. Thursday morning Les Wong was in Starbucks to address students and talked with them about their concerns. I heard a story that also on Thursday Mike Bath, I believe his name is, the head of Public Safety, was moving about on campus being followed with an individual with a clip board and they were running around saying what worked, what didn't work, what did we screw up, how did this work over here in this building with these people, how do we need to fix this? So, all of Les Wong's stuff to the public has been that the system worked great. I think that overall, yes, it did, because no one got hurt, people got safe. He hasn't come out and said that there were some issues that need to be addressed. And that seems to be what the Head of Public Safety was doing. So I wrote Les Wong a letter, detailing my experiences throughout the day, what I experienced, what I felt about individuals being left behind in Cohodas and about my friend who went to the diner, and had that experience with the silver car and how that may or may not have been reported further up than that. He responded this morning, saying it would be included in a debrief for the external and

internal police forces. It's being handled, I guess, I kind of got heard a little better. Les, he supposedly looked at it. Hopefully someone will look at it, and that's kind of one of the things that got me started on this is the fact that I was unhappy with the treatment of some of my friends and the way the information was coming out, that we didn't know what was going on. So I began trying to collect it, I talked with Dr. Magnaghi here, and we kind of got this idea going here, "well, let's archive it." You wanted a copy of the email, which is now on file, with the update of Les Wong's response. So, hopefully, we can get out and hear more stories about this stuff. I did receive an email early this morning that there would be a meeting at Temaki and Tea, in Hedgecock Building at 5:00 this evening, I won't be able to be there, but it's not for the media, it's for students, to discuss what happened and for officials to tell them more information, as well as to allow students to open the doors to the counselors there in Hedgecock if they're still dealing with the stress and the panic. It's kind of funny that that email that they sent out addressed one of the main points in my email to Les Wong, which was without this information, it's leading to panic and uneasiness within students and rumors. So then we get this email Friday morning for a session to debunk rumors and ease panic. Probably a coincidence, but it felt kind of neat to possibly play a part in fixing the system a little bit.

RMM: Okay.

SO: Is there anything else?

RMM: I think that's it for now.

END OF INTERVIEW