LAWSUIT

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should have been blocked off due to its condition.

Donald Beeson, the risk management administrator for the National Chi Psi Association, said this is the first time an accident like that has happened.

Beeson said the chapter followed the proper crisis response procedures, adding that he was notified within an hour of the incident.

Beeson believed that the accident was solely caused by a faulty balcony.

"We don't believe alcohol played any role in what happened," he said.

He added that they discussed the situation with other Chi Psi chapters.

"We use it as a way to educate our other chapters of what could happen," Beeson said.

The National Chi Psi Association employs an inspector in an attempt to prevent accidents like the one in Eugene. The inspector travels to all of the Chi Psi chapters that own a house. He said each house receives an inspection at least every three years.

Beeson added that he is flying into Portland later this week to meet with Brookman and Baston's lawyer to discuss a possible settlement of the suit.

Lauren Wimer Photographer

Two fraternity pledges are suing the Chi Psi house due to injuries that occurred when the balcony collapsed while they were standing on it nearly one year ago.

Contact the crime/health/safety reporter at lisacatto@dailyemerald.com.

MARS

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Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida. More than 300 million miles later, Spirit reached Mars, according to http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov.

Since its Jan. 3 landing and its descent onto the Martian surface, Spirit drivers have started looking for clues in rocks and soil indicating whether the environment was ever suitable to sustain life. Opportunity, Spirit's twin, is scheduled to reach Mars on Jan. 25 to begin a similar mission on the opposite side of the planet.

"This is just a great thing to be a part of," rover driver John Wright said from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif.

As one of eight drivers who work on the two rovers, Wright said teamwork is what got Spirit to Mars and what will take it to a new level in planetary exploration. With the ability to control rover mobility, arm operations and driving distances, Wright said everything follows the daily activity plan, which is directed by the rover's photos taken from the ground and from its orbital descent.

On Jan. 18, Spirit took a 10-foot, 30-minute "Sunday drive" en route to its first target, a football-sized, mountain-shaped rock called "Adirondack." The rock is named after a New York mountain range and is American Indian for "They of the great rocks."

Considering it took ancient equations and technological genius to coordinate Spirit's path to Mars, Wright said geology may guide the mission from now on, but technology and astronomy are what got it to Mars safely.

"Astronomy plays a huge role in the history of this mission," he said.

For some University professors, the Mars mission is truly exciting, even if astronomy has ventured beyond the Milky Way.

"It is exciting for us, but modern astronomy has drifted from solar systems to galaxies, stars and cosmology," Schombert said. "That's because knowledge has advanced so far."

However, the former NASA employee said students in his current introductory astronomy course aren't always eager to learn of Mars mission updates, which he includes on the course Web site as soon as they are released.

"If I have kept my students awake, these photos have served their purpose," Schombert said.

Assistant geology Professor David Schmidt is teaching a "very introductory" geology course on the effects weather can have on the earth's surface. Although Schmidt has mentioned the Mars mission in class, he said it's hard to get his students excited about the subject.

"It's a great accomplishment to get the rover there and working," Schmidt said. "But there hasn't been any groundbreaking information reported yet."

Despite a lack of student interest, Schmidt said most people recognize the important role that his field plays in the current mission.

"Geology is being used as a tool for their objective," he said. "And that objective is to use geological observations to find evidence of water, and hence, evidence for life."

Wright, who said he considers the rover a geologist of sorts, said "planetary geologists," representatives of a relatively new field, will be watching the mission on the edge of their seats.

"This is their thing," Wright said of the modern field, which emerged around the time of the Viking space missions from 1975 to 1982.

To boldly go where no rover has gone before

According to the NASA Web site, less than one-third of the Mars vehicles launched by all nations sent data back to Earth.

With the help of federal funding, NASA has outfitted the twin rovers with the ability to view the spectral characteristics of rocks and to analyze mineral compounds and chemical makeup. Besides its highly advanced computer, Spirit has many geological tools at its disposal, including an x-ray device, high-resolution cameras with rotating color filters and an infrared scanner, Wright said.

Although the ability to control the six-wheeled rovers is a technological feat, Wright said science still has its limits.

"We can't hit a hard rock and break it," he said. "But we can grind away at it and study it with a microscope."

As Spirit gets true-color and 3-D photos of rocks in its immediate vicinity — two were named Sushi and Sashimi — Wright and the other drivers are warming up for observations at Adirondack.

With the future of the geological "final frontier" in his hands, Wright said he is excited to see what lies beyond the Gusev Crater.

"This is absolutely fabulous," he said.

Contact the business/science/technology reporter at caronalarab@dailyemerald.com.