Princeton University laboratory accident sends three people to the hospital

By Bridget Clerkin/The Times of Trenton

PRINCETON BOROUGH—Three people were sent to the hospital this afternoon following an accident at Princeton University’s Frick Laboratory that sparked a flash fire and sent chemicals into the air.

A female post-doctoral student, another Princeton student and a security guard were treated for minor chemical irritations after an unplanned chemical reaction sent a plume of vapors into the lab they were occupying.

Trenton Fire Department Captain Michael Oakley said a solvent had been added at some point to nitric acid, sparking a flash and the smoke, as the chemicals were not compatible. The reaction caused the container housing the chemicals to break, some of the substance on the woman’s face, Oakley said.

He said that she suffered minor first degree burns under her eyes and was sent to the hospital after rinsing the irritated area with tap water at the lab. The security guard developed a minor rash on his arms after entering the room and was also sent to the hospital, along with the other student who was present, he said.

The fire was contained to the lab and nearly all of the chemicals in the air were sucked into the special hood under which the student was performing the experiment, Oakley said.

The Trenton hazmat team conducted a test for volatile organic compounds, a catch-all hazard test and other assessments using litmus paper and monitoring meters, he said. The tests came back negative and air quality in the building was good.

Oakley said that the room was turned over to university officials to undergo cleaning following the incident. The room
and the rest of the building were reopened after being inspected by school officials.

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