

Editorial

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THE BATTALION

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A Year of Healing

Aggie unity epitomized by 1999 Bonfire collapse aftermath

Someone once said that time heals all wounds — if only that were a universal truth.

For the past year, we — the Aggie family — have dealt with our sorrow the only way we could — by putting on a brave face and moving on with our lives.

However, we can only fool ourselves for so long.

It is still too soon to have completely come to terms with what happened.

It has been months since the Special Commission on the 1999 Aggie Bonfire determined what caused the collapse, yet we still lie awake at night asking the unanswerable question: Why?

The 12 victims are gone, and there is no way to bring them back.

With the anniversary of the collapse upon us, it would be easy to

dwell on these sobering truths, but it is imperative that we not let ourselves get caught up in self-pity.

Rather, we need to take a step back and view the bigger picture of what Texas A&M was and what it has become after the tragedy. We must realize something that has not been recognized in the past year, something that is bigger than Bonfire, something that gives us reason to rejoice — how we have passed the ultimate test of our collective character.

We have proven to the entire world — and ourselves — that the Aggie family not only exists, but thrives.

The buzzwords tradition, unity and family were uttered on this campus before the collapse, but did not have the meaning they have now.

Such a disparity allowed the pes-

simists among us to sneer at how our ideals are empty, how this school — when it comes down to it — is no different than any other university in America.

In hindsight, we know that could not be farther from the truth.

Through our courage, strength and empathy in the most trying of times, we have validated all the things that define us as Aggies. We experienced a trial by fire, and we have emerged triumphant.

If we can realize and accept this truth, then those who perished will not have died in vain.

Their deaths have forced us to examine collectively our worth as humans.

When we gather Saturday at 2:42 a.m. and light a candle for the 12 Aggies who died, remember that it does not matter how maroon our blood bleeds, but that we, regard-

less of race, religion or gender, stand united in the Aggie spirit.

The death of the 12 students will always be close to our hearts and that is where it should remain. This ceremony signifies our time to close, not end, a chapter in our lives.

The only fitting tribute to their memory would be our continued success. Long after we graduate, forge our careers and start our own families, we must remember our time here. Shine that Aggie ring, straighten that diploma on the wall and keep in touch with cherished friends.



SELSO GARZA/THE BATTALION

A new chapter in A&M history ...

By BRADY CREEL
The Battalion

Early Thursday morning — Nov. 18, 1999 — many Aggies were camping in front of G. Rollie White Coliseum waiting to pull tickets for the football game against the University of Texas. Then came the news: Bonfire stack had collapsed. Some students were dead, many were injured, and more were trapped under the rubble that had been their masterpiece only a few hours earlier.

But as one would expect from Aggies, their disbelief of the disaster did not negate their loyalty toward their school or toward each other. From the first word that stack had fallen, Aggies rushed to the Polo Fields to help in the rescue effort.

The bad news came in sharp blows throughout the

day, and as the number of fallen Aggies rose, many Aggie hearts ached as never before. Football became trivial that day, as did classes and tests. The football team canceled practice so it, too, could be on the Polo Fields moving logs from the fallen stack.

The mood on campus became somber and silent, confused and uncertain. Students prayed for the injured and families of the deceased, and donors lined up outside blood banks.

In the following hours, A&M held its breath as rescue workers began to unravel the Texas Aggie Bonfire.

That night, more than 14,000 people assembled at the memorial service in Reed Arena, searching for answers and consolation. Texas Lt. Gov. Rick Perry, A&M Class of '72, addressed the crowd

with tear-filled eyes and a voice filled with emotion.

"We will remember them as long as there is a Texas A&M and the Aggie spirit, and that, my friends, is forever," he said.

The crowd ended the ceremony by spontaneously singing "Amazing Grace," followed by the lonely sound of shoes shuffling away.

Perry ordered the flags of Texas to be flown at half-staff that day, the media flocked to the A&M campus, and the focus of the world turned to College Station. In the days that followed, the world mourned with A&M as it paid its final respects to its deceased family members. Twelve had fallen. The Twelfth Man stood united. And 12 months later, those Aggies are remembered.

"Texas A&M, the eyes of Texas are upon you, and our

hearts are with you," said Don Evans, UT Board of Regents chairman, at the Unity Rally, held the Monday after Bonfire collapsed in place of UT's annual Hex Rally in Austin on .

The healing began. On Thanksgiving Day, more than 80,000 people converged on the Polo Fields with candles. The next day, the Aggies defeated the UT Longhorns, 20-16.

The Longhorn Band dedicated its halftime performance to the 12 Aggies who died. In rare form, Aggies remained standing for the visiting band and swelled with emotion as the Longhorns raised A&M flags over their own.

Within days of the collapse, A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen formed a commission to investigate the collapse and selected Leo Lin-

beck Jr. — who had no relation to A&M — to chair the commission, in an effort to place the investigation out of the University's hands.

Muster came in April. The families and friends of the 12 Bonfire victims answered "here," and a candle was lighted for each.

On May 2 — after an extension of the deadline from March 31 — the Special Commission on the 1999 Aggie Bonfire cited structural complications and the University's "tunnel vision" as causes for the collapse — an analysis that cost the University close to \$2 million.

"If I had to allow my heart to make the decision, we'd have a Bonfire," Bowen said after the commission's report. "But my heart will not make the decision — my brain has to make the decision."

On June 17, Bowen

announced his decision: Bonfire would not burn for two years, and future Bonfires would be limited to a one-tier design with no "cut" and increased University supervision.

Keep The Fire Burning (KTFB), a group of students, planned an off-campus bonfire despite its denouncement by administrators and student leaders.

On Oct. 27, KTFB announced it would not have its off-campus bonfire after the organization became entangled in complications over an insurance policy and lack of time.

One year later, the University still waits. Some are waiting for closure, and others simply want the reality of the tragedy to solidify. But the consensus is clear among Aggies — as a pot left at the site says, "We will never forget."

1909- First Bonfire made from a small pile of trash to get students excited about the UT game. It was about 12 feet high.



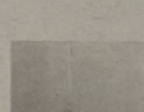
1928- First known photograph of bonfire.

1935- Students "acquire" a local farmer's log barn. All Corps of Cadets units were instructed to repay the farmer, and the University takes charge of Bonfire.



1942- Bonfire built for the filming of the movie *We've Never Been Licked*. Live trees were cut for the first time.

1946- First centerpole used in construction.

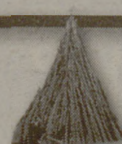


1948- Another reported UT student fire bomb attempt fails.

1912- Cadets use lumber from construction of Legett and Milner halls to build Bonfire.

1933- UT students unsuccessfully attempt to ignite the stack early with fire bombs.

1936- First Bonfire built with materials found at a specified site. No live trees are cut.



1943- First all-log Bonfire, which stands 25 feet high.

1947- First spliced centerpole stands at 50 feet.

TIMELINE BY RUBEN DELUNA AND BRANDON HENDERSON / THE BATTALION