

# OVERCOMING DISASTER

Story by Maureen Kane

In the year that has passed since the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse, the lives of Aggies have changed, including that of John Comstock, a sophomore biomedical science major and one of the 27 injured in the collapse.

Comstock was the last to be pulled alive from the stack of logs that was to have been Bonfire 1999. Suffering from multiple injuries that left him in critical condition, Comstock remained conscious in the stack for seven hours while rescue workers and engineers attempted to free him.

Even while describing the experience, Comstock maintains his sense of humor.

"For those seven hours a lot runs through your head," he said. "I thought from the ridiculous to the serious. First I was just shocked — I didn't know what the hell had just happened. Then somebody grabbed my hand, and I kind of stayed calm after that. I was thinking, 'My right hand is trapped. Had to be my right hand, couldn't have been my left,' or, 'I guess I got out of those two management tests tomorrow.'"

Comstock's heroic reputation stems in part from his ability to put the events of Nov. 18, 1999, in perspective while maintaining a positive outlook on life and from his drive and determination to recover.

"I guess the will to live was just in me," Comstock said. "People in ICU said, 'You can just look at him and tell that he doesn't want to die.'"

Recovery began when Comstock regained consciousness sometime between Christmas and New Year's in the ICU of the College Station Medical Center, where he stayed for 83 days.

"The weirdest thing was ... they had put me to sleep when I got to the hospital, because I was awake when they pulled me out," Comstock said.

When Comstock awoke, his left leg was amputated above the knee, and he had scars around his torso and nerve damage from the waist down.

"It's almost impossible to name how many surgeries [I had] because they work on you for eight hours, then wrap you in plastic and let the doctors get some rest to work on you tomorrow," Comstock said.

"I'm actually all in one piece now," he added with a laugh.

Even though he is back "in one piece," Comstock said, some things still pose challenges to his daily routine.

"It's very difficult living life in a [wheelchair]," he said. "The accessibility of everything really diminishes compared to walking around."

Another challenge he faces is painful physical therapy. A major part of therapy is strengthening muscles that are not used frequently and then stretching them, Comstock said.

"Scars grow like weeds — they basically stick to anything," Comstock said. "I've got to stretch out a lot and try to break the scar tissue up so that I have mobility."

Comstock said he has learned that pain is a necessary part of recovery. He said laughter and his personal bond with his therapists help him get through the tough times.

"They love me, and that's why they inflict pain upon me," he said. "They want to see me walk just as much as I do. You get kind of used to it after a year. Now it's to the point where I'm pretty comfortable with how well I'm progressing. I'm starting to make leaps and bounds in therapy."

When asked if walking is one of his goals, Comstock replied with an emphatic "of course."

"I'm expecting that," he said. "It's just a matter of time."

Comstock will be spending more time in therapy in the upcoming months so that he will be prepared to come back to A&M in the fall of 2001. Previously, he had intended to return to A&M in the spring of 2001.

"I decided I need more therapy," he said. "I can't be in College Station and get the same therapy, so I just

take classes at Richland Community College here."

He said he misses A&M and is looking forward to coming back next fall.

Although he said he is excited about his return to A&M, Comstock said it is difficult for him to anticipate.

"It's strange because I don't know who knows me when I'm on campus," he said. "I can't even imagine what it'll be like when I come back."

Comstock will attend the Bonfire remembrance ceremony Saturday, and he said he does not know what to expect.

"I don't know how hard this weekend is going to hit me," he said. "I don't know if I'm ready for it or not. I always think about the 12 people who died."

The Bonfire collapse may have changed his outlook on life, but Comstock said his love for A&M and Bonfire remains unchanged. With a strong desire to recover and a deep love for Bonfire, Comstock anticipates watching the next Bonfire with his friends.

"I want to see Bonfire again, as soon as possible," Comstock said, and added proudly, "You can quote me on this, 'Moses builds the hell!'"

But Comstock has not forgotten the hours he already has invested in Bonfire.

"I want to light the next one that goes up. I put my work in and didn't get to see the damn thing burn," Comstock said, laughing, then more seriously, "I think next time they light it, they ought to use 12 torches."



FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION  
John Comstock, above with his mother (middle), was one of the 27 Aggies injured in from the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse. He is currently in rehabilitation.

## 27 Injured

- |                      |                 |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Nate Atkinson        | Lanny Joe Hayes | Paul "Alex" Jones     |
| Dominic Braus        | Will Harlan     | Brandon Allen Jozwiak |
| Jennifer Calaway     | Britt Henley    | John Kramer           |
| John Comstock        | Caleb Hill      | William Lyckman       |
| William "Bill" Davis | Chad Hutchinson | Amy McLeod            |
| Clayton Frady        | Jody Jacobs     | Mandy Nakai           |
| Leslie Graham        |                 | Matthew Robbins       |
|                      |                 | Holly Rotenberry      |
|                      |                 | Lauren Scanlan        |
|                      |                 | Milton "Chip" Thiel   |
|                      |                 | Bruce Unger           |
|                      |                 | J.J. Washam           |
|                      |                 | Jeremy Woorley        |
|                      |                 | Derrek Woodley        |

## Injured students in search of answers, look back on events

By ARATI BHATTACHARYA  
The Battalion

Considering themselves lucky amid the tragedy of Nov. 18, 1999, the 27 injured students of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse look back on the tragedy with different perspectives and lessons learned.

"I still can't believe something we loved so much and dedicated all our time to could kill 12 people," said John Kramer, a junior history major, who was injured in the collapse.

Kramer said he remembers taking Bryan McClain to the Polo Fields that night. After the stack fell, he said, he searched for his buddies and tried to locate McClain. He did not learn of McClain's death until the next morning.

Chip Thiel, a senior agricultural economics major, said he remembers talking to Chris Breen, Jeremy Frampton and Jerry Self on top of the fourth stack. He heard the structure shift as Breen yelled something. Thiel said the next thing he knew, he was jumping off the back of the stack and tumbling down to save his life. Thiel said he lost a lot that night — three friends and his membership in Company E-1 of the Corps of Cadets.

"I miss Frampton a lot," Thiel said. "He always made people laugh. But I just try to think about all the good times, about spending time with the people who enjoy doing the same things you do."

Lanny Hayes, a sophomore economics major, said he was convinced he was going to die the night Bonfire collapsed.

"I didn't even doubt death, I was so sure I was going to die," he said.

Hayes said he did not know he was going to be all right until his swing hit the ground and logs fell around him. His right foot was crushed in the accident, forcing him to be in a wheelchair for five weeks and on crutches until February.

"I was trapped under the stack

for an hour and a half," Hayes said. "I tried not to look around and see what I didn't want to. I knew dead bodies were around me."

Alex Jones, a sophomore mechanical engineering major, said he was hoisted onto the first tier of the southwest side of the stack. He said he felt the structure fall beneath him first and then heard the sound of chaos.

Jones was badly bruised on his back and legs, which took one month to heal. Jones said his emotional wounds have yet to heal.

"I was really lucky," Jones said. "I could've easily been one of the 12 Aggies that died, but God kept me around for a reason."

Hayes said he would work on Bonfire again.

"The Class of 2003 has a duty to do that," Hayes said. "Things will be different, like construction and attitudes, but if we don't embrace it, who else will understand the spirit of Bonfire?"

Jones said he would not work on Bonfire again.

"It's just something in my heart that would keep me from working it again," he said.

The injured students said they are trying to move on with their lives.

Hayes said he does not regret his participation in Bonfire.

"I think about it every day; it's impossible not to," Hayes said. "I don't want to forget about it, though. It's the best thing I've done at and for A&M."

Thiel, who will graduate in December and get married this summer, said he has no regrets about Bonfire.

"The wounds never heal," Thiel said. "You can't forget the past, but you can't keep it from moving forward. I don't question why I made it, but I did. It makes you think about stuff, like what if it's the last time I see my family or take your last breath. There are lots of 'ifs.' I'm not a hero, just a really lucky guy."

**Nov. 18, 1999**  
Aggie Bonfire collapses at 2:42 a.m., killing 11 Aggies and injuring 27 others



**Nov. 19**  
12th Bonfire victim, Tim Kerlee Jr., dies

**Nov. 24**  
Memorial funds set up for victims

**Nov. 26** Leo Linbeck Jr. is chosen as head of the Special Commission on 1999 Aggie Bonfire Collapse

**Dec. 6**  
TABC launches Bonfire inquiry

**Dec. 8**  
Soil is ruled out as factor in Bonfire collapse

**Dec. 20** Last of memorial items left at Polo Fields are gathered

**Jan. 18**  
Students return for spring semester

**Jan. 18**  
Bonfire commission hires last firm for collapse investigation

**Feb. 5**  
Lovett, Keen perform at Bonfire Benefit Concert



**Nov. 21**  
Bowen names commission to study collapse

**Nov. 25**  
Thousands mourn victims in candlelight vigil on Polo Fields

**Dec. 4**  
Alcohol found in victim's bodies

**Dec. 7**  
Silver Taps for Bonfire victims is held

**Dec. 10**  
Bonfire commission picks consultants



**Jan. 11, 2000**  
The Bryan-College Station Eagle reports Bowen will resign if administration is found at fault for Bonfire collapse

**Jan. 20**  
John Comstock, last hospitalized Aggie, is upgraded to serious condition

**Feb. 9**  
Comstock begins rehabilitation