

Standing by THE STUDENTS

Professors provide shoulders for Aggies during trying time

By CAYLA CARR & ANNE HOAR

The Battalion

Nov. 18, 1999, was just another Thursday to chemical engineering professor Mark Holtzapple until he drove down Texas Avenue and heard the radio announcement of the tragic event that would affect his students and the family at Texas A&M.

"I did not know anything about the collapse until that morning," he said. "I was driving to work, and I looked out the window and saw the collapsed stack."

"I usually open class with a big 'Howdy,' but suddenly that didn't seem appropriate anymore," Holtzapple said.

The aftermath of the 1999 Bonfire collapse affected many people. While parents, students and friends mourned the losses of their loved ones, A&M professors counseled students and grieved in the background.

Chad Powell, a victim of the collapse, was a student in Holtzapple's Engineering 111 class.

Holtzapple said he realized Powell had been killed in the collapse when he saw a list of the students who died in the collapse and heard from students who were in Powell's group in the class. In Engineering 111, students complete many assignments in groups of four.

"The same students go to class together and work in teams," Holtzapple said. "The group that had [Powell] was devastated. It created a cloud over the class and his group."

Craig Rotter, an agricultural education professor, received a call about 45 minutes after the stack fell early that morning. He immediately went to the site because he knew several of his students helped build Bonfire.

"I asked around and made sure that the students I knew were on the stack were OK," Rotter said. "I heard one student call my name, and he ran up to me, crying."

After comforting that student, Rotter spent time with his students and in his office throughout the day. He returned to the site at 2 p.m. to continue helping students.

"I spent more time with that same student," Rotter said. "He was devastated."

Rotter remembered the memorial ceremony, held at Reed Arena that night.

"I think it showed a lot that the student leaders (of Bonfire) were driven straight to the memorial

from the fields," he said. "They worked all day at the site and then went to the memorial. I really think it showed a lot of courage."

Rotter checked on his students with phone calls and visits the rest of the fall semester, over the holiday break and through the spring semester. Today, he continues to talk with his students who were affected by the Bonfire collapse.

Rotter said the professors' role with the students during difficult times should be almost like that of a surrogate parent, which is a role professors historically have held at A&M.

"I think professors shouldn't be afraid to show our hearts and our human side," Rotter said. "We'll all be reliving those moments in our minds. We should show the students we care about them inside and outside the classroom."

Gary Sickler, a meteorology professor, offered vivid reflections of the somber morning. He met his class at 11 a.m., aware of the accident and unsure what to expect from his students. Surprised to know that many students were unaware of the occurrence, he explained what happened and offered his cell phone to students who needed to call their parents and reassure them. As tears fell from the students' eyes, Sickler offered comfort and answered questions until all was silent and then dismissed the class.

Sickler later discovered that a student from

his class, Derrek Woodley, was on the top of the stack when it fell. Sickler learned the extent of Woodley's injuries when he visited with Woodley and his parents at the hospital.

"I realized how affected this student was after I talked with him about the incident," Sickler said. "One of Derrek's friends was killed in the Bonfire incident. He was with Derrek on top of the stack, and Derrek had just switched places with his buddy before it fell."

Sickler graduated from A&M in 1974, so he said he knows how much Bonfire means to students. He said he realized the impact this tragedy would have on Aggies everywhere. Like other professors at A&M, Sickler said he wished there was something he could have done to prevent the collapse, but as a former student of A&M, he said he hopes the tragedy will not prevent the burning of other Bonfires in the future.

"Holtzapple said it is important for professors to be sympathetic as the one-year anniversary of the Bonfire collapse approaches, especially if a student lost someone close to him or her in the collapse. It is also important for the students to take charge of the situation, he said.

"It's important for students to realize that life gives you difficult things to deal with," Holtzapple said. "There are many tragedies in life, and it's important to learn how to recover and move on."

Administrators reflect upon their involvement with students the day Bonfire collapsed

By STUART HUTSON

The Battalion

Like that of so many Aggies, the longest day in his recent memory began with a phone call shortly before 3 a.m.

"One of the girls called me, and

she said, 'Bonfire fell,' " said Rusty Thompson, faculty adviser for Aggie Bonfire and assistant director of MSC student programs. "My first question was if anyone was on the stack, but, at that time of night, I knew the answer."

Throwing on his clothes and overcoat, he rushed to his car, not know-

ing what to expect when he arrived.

"I just kept trying to tell myself that maybe it wasn't as bad as it sounded," Thompson said. "I don't know how long it took me that night ... but it seemed like an eternity."

"I saw them pull out Jeremy Frampton's body. [The centerpole pot and I] couldn't do anything else but hug each other and cry."

Thompson said he began working with those already there to compile a checklist of Bonfire workers in an attempt to determine who might have been buried under the collapsed stack.

"The initial shock and horror of what had happened was tremendous," he said. "I would stop and look and think about the families of those still in there. The moms, dads, brothers and sisters who were sleeping comfortably, not knowing what they were going to wake up to."

Thompson remained at

the site for almost 24 hours, leaving only to attend the memorial service that night in Reed Arena. One year later, Thompson said not a day passes without his thinking of the night Bonfire collapsed.

"I still see those [students'] faces every day when I close my eyes," he said. "Such young eyes witnessed things that no one should ever have to see."

Those things were also witnessed by the eyes of the nation as the media descended upon College Station.

"It was intimidating, but [the media] were fair overall, and I just tried to put myself in their shoes. What was a heartfelt tradition to us was a stack of logs to them," he said.

Despite this lack of full understanding, Howard Graves, chancellor of the Texas A&M University System, said nationwide support flowed in as news of the collapse spread.

"I'm fairly new to Texas A&M, and I've never seen a Bonfire before, so I missed some of the impact felt by others," said Graves, who became chancellor in June 1999. "But what I began to see, and what the whole nation began to see, was how strong Aggie cohesion is."

Graves was notified of the collapse by A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen.

"When I first was told, three people were counted dead, and I just hoped there wouldn't be any more and said a little prayer," Graves said. "But later, other phone calls came in from all over the country, saying that they were with us and would help out with whatever they could."

Graves said he went to the Bonfire site after the situation calmed. However, Ronald Douglas, provost and executive vice president of academic affairs did not make it out to the site on that day.

"I stayed back in the office while the president was out at the site," he said. "There were questions pertaining to the University that had to be answered."

Douglas spent the day meeting with the deans of the University colleges and other academic officials.

"Our primary objective at first was just to ensure that students had as much latitude as possible during this time," he said.

The administrators said the haunting memories of the crisis that morning will stay with them forever.

"No one's experience was the same. But if we stick together, we can find the strength to get through the tough times," Thompson said.



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Feb. 23 Bonfire panel seeks postponement of March 31 deadline to May 2	Mar. 4 Replant becomes tribute to 12 victims	Apr. 14 Comstock goes home after five months	May 2 Alcohol report on victims released	May 5 Engineering Board to review commission report to see if state laws or engineering standards were broken	Jun. 10 Keep The Fire Burning and hundreds of participants rally and petition to keep Bonfire burning	Jun. 16 Bowen suspends Bonfire until 2002 and amends design and construction plans	Aug. 28 Keep The Fire Burning unveils plans to build off-campus bonfire	Sept. 20 Student Senate supports Bowen's Bonfire decision	Oct. 27 Keep The Fire Burning calls off bonfire plans	Nov. 14 Students petition Bowen to change cut participation
Mar. 1 Bonfire commission requests additional \$1 million	Apr. 15 Honorary Marine title given to Heard	May 2 Commission releases Bonfire report, citing organizational and structural problems	May 19 OSHA clears crane operator in Aggie Bonfire collapse	Aug. 17 Bonfire logs are removed from Polo Fields	Sept. 9 Engineering Board opposes off-campus bonfire plans	Oct. 23 Plans announced for Bonfire memorial ceremony	Oct. 31 A&M students receive Bonfire Memorial Scholarships	Nov. 18, 2000 Bonfire memorial ceremony		