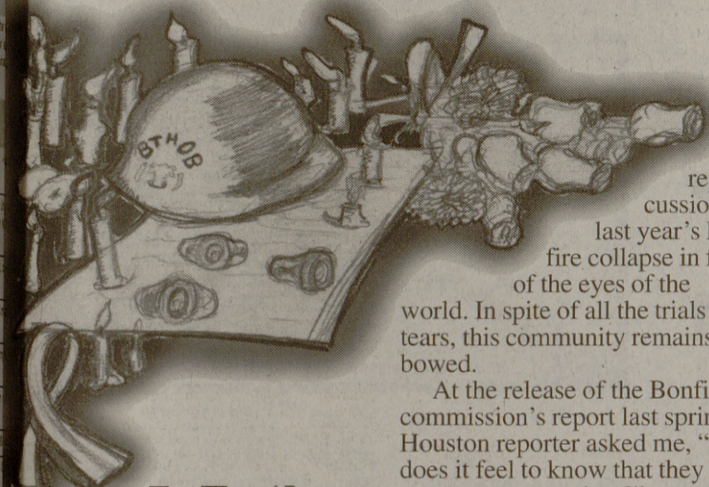


OPINION

THE BATTALION

Time for reflection

Anniversary of Bonfire collapse cause for remembrance, renewal



Nov. 17, 1999, was a night of great debate for me.

I was a student at Texas A&M at Galveston. All semester I had planned on going to College Station to work on push for a couple of days.

This was going to be the best time for me to go and contribute to Bonfire. But that night I was studying for a test to be taken on Thursday.

My plans were to leave Galveston for College Station around 7 pm, work through the night, then leave for Galveston at 10 the next morning to get back in time for my exam.

I did not feel like I knew the material well enough to do well on the exam and decided late Wednesday night to stay in Galveston and go to College Station after I took my exam.

Little did I know that seeing Bonfire the weekend before would be my last time to see it standing in its majesty. I woke up the next morning in my dorm to hear news of Bonfire's fall.

I immediately turned on my television, and was speechless. My first instinct was to jump into the car and go help rebuild, but as time progressed and a death count mounted, I knew that was not going to happen. I took my test that afternoon, skipped my other classes and came to College Station.

There was no way I could stay in Galveston knowing that my family, the Aggies, was in crisis. I walked around the site in disbelief, ready to help at the drop of a hat. The ceremony in Reed Arena that night was an experience I will never forget.

At that time, I knew exactly what it was like to be a part of the biggest and best family in the world. The grief was intense, the despair immense and the rallying of a family unmatched.

True is the saying, "From the outside looking in you can't understand it; from the inside looking out, you can't explain it."

Andy Hancock is a senior journalism major.

The last year has not been an easy one for the Aggie community. We have had to struggle with the realities and

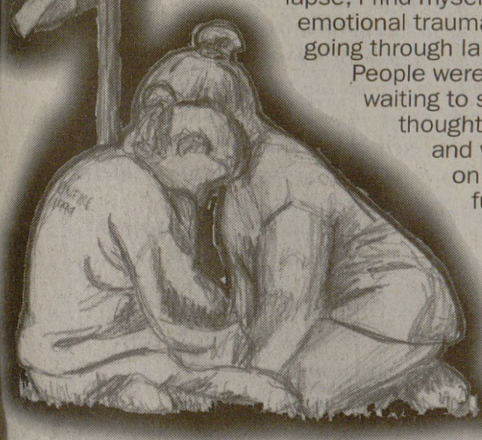
Students remember their fallen friends

It is hard to believe it has been one year since the Bonfire collapse. I wonder how the families of the 12 fallen Aggies are feeling and what they are thinking about.

As I read the articles about the collapse, I find myself thinking of the emotional trauma every Aggie was going through last year.

People were watching and waiting to see what we thought, how we reacted, and what we planned on doing in the future.

These same people questioned our traditions and our Aggie spirit and in the end realized they could not under-



repercussions of last year's Bonfire collapse in front of the eyes of the world. In spite of all the trials and tears, this community remains unbowed.

At the release of the Bonfire commission's report last spring, a Houston reporter asked me, "How does it feel to know that they said you guys screwed up?"

That was the first time the idea of blame crossed my mind. I did not care who was responsible, because there were more important things to worry about.

People looking in from the outside would be more than happy to point fingers and assign blame. Aggies had to bury their dead, console the bereaved, and then console themselves. We are all the keepers of the Aggie spirit, and this was our ultimate test.

Outsiders have been quick to point to the squabbles of the past year to say the Aggie spirit was fading. They could not have been more wrong. While we argued about the possibility of an off-campus bonfire and Dr. Bowen's decision to discontinue Bonfire until 2002, we still were all Aggies. We still were true to each other.

Indeed, the spirit of the 12 and "the spirit that can ne'er be told" has carried us through the year. Despite the adversity we have faced, our spirit has stayed strong.

Saturday, we will dedicate a fitting memorial to the 12 who have passed on, and let them know we love and miss them. But the dedication of the memorial will prove to be more than this; it will show the world that we still love each other. It will be proof for all to see that the Aggie spirit stands strong, through right and through wrong.

Mark Passwaters is a senior electrical engineering major.

I remember it like it was yesterday. A&M already had confronted the reality of the lost

Aggies while the rest of the nation slept, oblivious to the fallen logs.

It was only a dream until 4:30 Thursday morning when I got the call. The voice on the other end spoke only two simple, yet devastating words: "Bonfire fell," and then there was only silence. Unsure of what I had heard, I mumbled for clarification, but the words were the same, with more anguish.

The next thing I knew, everything became loud and all I heard was a persistent tone pounding in my ear. I hung up the phone, still half-asleep. I did not confront the magnitude of what was told to me until the sun rose and the newness of morning consumed me. I had not comprehended those two words spoken to me before, and all I could determine was that the newness of morning was gone and had been an eternity for students at Texas A&M.

Something told me to turn on

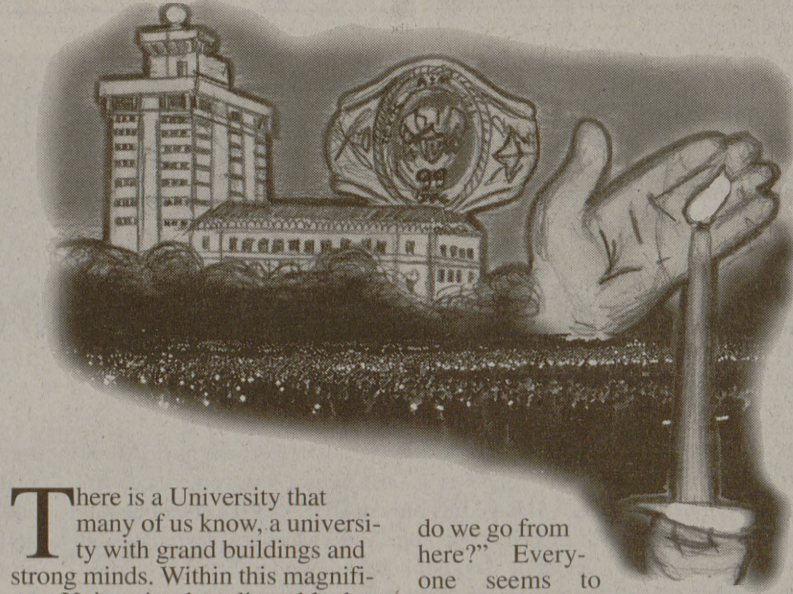


ADRIAN CALCANELO/THE BATTALION

the television, and there it was — the reality I dreaded.

Texas A&M Bonfire fell, said the reporter. The result had been four lost loved ones. Little did I know the number would only grow throughout the day as more people confronted the reality A&M already knew.

Cayla Carr is a junior speech communication major.



There is a University that many of us know, a university with grand buildings and strong minds. Within this magnificent University there lies a blank stretch of grass where just a year ago stood an unbreakable tradition. Horribly, it did break.

Just 12 short months ago, this stretch of grass was filled with joy quickly changed to grief, and this remarkable University was left in chaos.

Twelve brilliant, strong and spirited lives were lost and the stretch of grass was changed forever. The magnitude of this loss could be felt by all when thousands came to the little stretch of grass to mourn.

They stood in stillness, and the silence was profound. The little patch of grass burned, not with the mighty tradition, but with the flames of those in anguish.

We will forever mark that tragic day in our memories. We will pause and be silent. We have found our new tradition.

This grand University will always continue some traditions, for they have become our ideals.

We will continue to show up at midnight on Fridays and fill the stands of a grand football field in the middle of the massive University.

There are traditions that possess little value — surrounded by laughter and joy — but insignificant to the value of human life.

Now, we have created a new and sad tradition and this Friday night we will gather once again on that stretch of grass in the heart of this great University to mourn the fallen 12.

When you are there, listen to the silence ... be still, be silent, and listen.

Sunnye Owens is a junior journalism major.

One of the questions circulating the Texas A&M campus in the months following Bonfire's collapse has been, "Where

do we go from here?" Everyone seems to have an opinion on this decision.

The official response came from A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen in May, but other individuals and groups like Keep The Fire Burning have their own stances on the future of Bonfire.

In rolling through my own memories of the event, one thought stands out that Aggies should keep in mind when debating the future of Bonfire — we are not alone. Our decisions and behavior in shaping the future of the tradition are being watched and scrutinized by people and universities across the nation.

A recent look at the archived Bonfire memorabilia, and events at two other schools have opened my eyes to how what happens in College Station affects other schools.

One of the items in the anthropology department's archives that jumped out at me was a large board full of messages from University of Texas students. Immediately, I spotted a note from a high school friend, wishing Aggies all the best.

On Nov. 17 and 18, the UT Tower will remain dark; UT has also put orange, maroon and white ribbons around on-campus trees, and the flags at Main Mall will fly at half-staff.

Thousands of miles to the northwest, in Hanover, N.H., students at Dartmouth College are being encouraged by Dean James Larimore to "take a step back and think about our own bonfire."

The Dartmouth bonfire is significantly different from A&M's, but Dartmouth's administration has arranged for a construction and engineering firm to supervise its bonfire's construction this year — all because of last November's Aggie Bonfire collapse.

The collapse of Bonfire and its aftermath attracted the attention of people across the country. Aggies have a tradition of respect, and that tradition needs to be remembered as the nation is watching. That means no renegade bonfires, no bickering and no petty arguing that the University is trying to hurt the tradition.

There are proper avenues for shaping Bonfire's future. If we use them and act with respect and decorum during the transition toward Bonfire 2002, the nation will take notice.

Eric Dickens is a senior English major.

Mail Call

stand the bonds that fellow Aggies have. I am proud to be a part of this great University and to see and feel the Aggie spirit.

This University was built on traditions that only Aggies can understand and only we can miss.

I will stand alongside my fellow Aggies with a saddened heart this Saturday at 2:42 a.m. to reflect on this tragedy and remember those who lost their lives.

I will leave a stronger person and be prouder even still to be a Texas Aggie.

Dawn Self Class of '01

Tomorrow morning, the FHK complex will walk out to the Polo Fields, silent with our pots in hand — just like a year ago when we were headed to our stack shift.

Unlike last Nov. 18, we will be three short.

Although Mike, Chad and Jamie will not be walking with us, they will be there.

Just like every other day that has passed since the accident, they will be there — at the piano in the Memorial

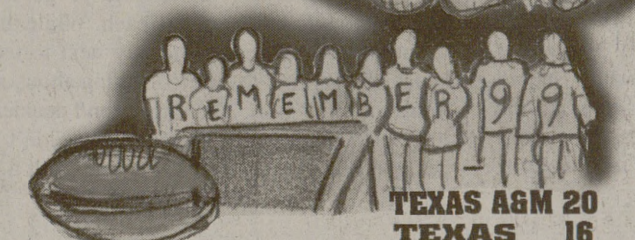
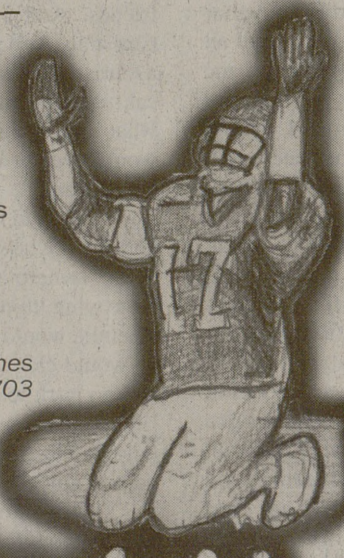
Student Center, dancing at the Texas Hall of Fame, the annoying wildcats ever.

Each one of them will always have a special place in our hearts.

We are so grateful to have those memories and to remember our friends together.

The Aggie spirit will never let their memory be forgotten.

Rachael Hines Class of '03



Softly Call

The following staff editorial was published in The Battalion on Nov. 19, 1999 — the day after the Bonfire collapse.

Even today, its poignancy is sharp.

Consider some of the events surrounding Bonfire in the past year — Texas A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen's decision to postpone Bonfire, the efforts to hold an off-campus bonfire and the bickering over how Bonfire will be constructed when it returns.

This editorial puts it all in somber perspective.

David Lee is a senior economics and journalism major.

The feeling was not unlike waking up to news that the sun had failed to rise.

A mid-November morning without the stack was only slightly less surreal than a dawn without a daybreak.

Unfortunately, the tragic facts — at least nine dead, dozens injured — are only too real, and the weight of sadness on campus is almost tangible.

Such a heavy burden cannot be lifted by mere words, and little can be said about this 90-year-old tradition that will be remembered in another 90 years.

But to say nothing would do a disservice to the memories of our friends.

To those who knew them, we know you are hurting, but we can never know how much.

The families and friends of all those affected deserve and have our sober thoughts and prayers.

To those who did not know them, we know you are hurting too. Long after we know how it happened, we will still be wondering why.

In the meantime, it is important to remember that this is a time for condolences, not quarrels.

The lives lost are worth much more than angry arguments, and respectful reflection should not give place to wranglings over traditions.

Much will be said in the coming weeks that would be better left unsaid. For this is not the time to point fingers of blame or speculate about the future of Bonfire.

What is appropriate instead is silence.

It would be wrong to turn this tragedy into an opportunity for loud debate. The lives lost are worth much more than angry arguments, and respectful reflection should not give place to wranglings over traditions.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this horrible accident, it will strike at the very heart of who we are as human beings.

It will remind us of the inevitable fragility of life and the enduring stability of friendship. And it will teach us more than we ever knew about the indomitable strength of the Aggie spirit.

What remains, then, is not to despair, but instead to discover our true worth — to do better with the lives we have been given in honor of the lives that have been taken.

There is nothing else to do. Already, the A&M community has exemplified the truism that the worst of times bring out the best in people.

Concerned students, staff and community residents have generously provided resources of hope and shoulders of help.

But Aggies expect no less, and we know we will recover from this blow with the dignity and determination that make this University great.

Flags flying at half-mast are not indicative of half-hearted Aggies.

Our hearts are full and hopeful.

It will take time to come to terms with what seems so surreal.

But in the end, we will have learned that in life, the real stuff is the rough stuff.

And the rough stuff makes us stronger.