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— Schuyler Houser, student body president

TWO YEARS LATER

Families, students to hold personal vigils on Polo Fields

By SOMMER BUNCE
THE BATTALION

The crowd of students gathered on the Polo Fields at 2:42 a.m. Nov. 18, 2000, was not much different than the Aggies who stood there a year before. They had a love for Aggie Bonfire and they shared a commitment to a University and a way of life that had shaped, and then in 1999 changed, Aggie lives.

The difference in 2000 was that the Aggie family was 12 members short. They stood in the mud and cold rain, a sea of Bonfire pots held over hearts, looking through to the central flame to memorialize the victims of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse.

Though the University will make no official observation this Sunday of the second anniversary of Bonfire's collapse, the families and friends of the 12 Aggies killed and 27 injured when the three-tiered stack fell to the ground said they cannot and will not ever forget.

The families said they will have their own memorials. Christopher David Breen spent the evening of Nov. 17, 1999, with his brother and his father watching the sunset from his brother's back porch. Breen, a 1997 A&M graduate active in building Bonfire while he was a student, was working on the stack when it groaned and fell in seven frantic seconds early the next morning, and was killed.

Breen's brother Sean Breen, an Austin attorney, said the family will gather on his back porch in the hills outside of Austin this Saturday, Nov. 17, to watch the sunset and to remember Chris' last sunset two years before.

"It was the last time we saw Chris alive," he said.

Breen said the family will always come together on the date of Chris' death.

Janice and Timothy Kerlee Sr. lost their only son, Timothy Doran Kerlee Jr., 42 hours after the stack he hung from the stadium.

Doctors told the Kerlees he had almost died three times on the surgeon's table.

Janice Kerlee said she had been given the chance to say goodbye to her son in the time she and her husband spent with Tim Jr. before he died at 8 p.m., Nov. 19, 1999. The Kerlees soon moved to College Station, called by God, Janice Kerlee said, to begin the healing process at A&M.

The Kerlees are active members of the A&M community and now serve in college ministries at the A&M United Methodist Church. This summer, the couple hosted two students from their son's Corps outfit who needed to attend summer school but could not afford rent for an apartment.

Janice Kerlee said this week has been one of the hardest since the collapse.

"You'll cry a lot, and it's very emotional," she said. "Any anniversary of death is hard."

The Kerlees will be at the site of the 1999 Bonfire at 2:42 a.m. Sunday morning with candles and prayers. Other families will be there, Janice Kerlee said, and she expects that some students, mostly juniors and seniors who knew the victims and who were on campus when Bonfire fell, also will be there, silently holding their own vigils and singing "Amazing Grace."

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The 1998 Aggie Bonfire was the most recent student-organized Bonfire and burned Nov. 24, 1998 — the Tuesday before the University of Texas-Texas A&M football game.

Bonfire ready to burn

Students build off-campus fire

By BRANDIE LIFFICK
THE BATTALION

An off-campus Bonfire not sanctioned by Texas A&M has been built at an undisclosed location and will burn within the next week, said Kevin Jackson, one of the organizers of the project and a junior engineering major and.

"It will be burned soon," Jackson said.

Jackson, a former resident of Hotard Hall, said participants are a combination of current and former students, and are not associated with any University group.

"This is not a Bonfire endorsed by Hotard Hall or any residence hall singularly," Jackson said.

Jackson said the cut process started approximately four weeks ago, but planning started when University President Dr. Ray M. Bowen postponed Bonfire in June of 2000, after the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse that killed 11 students and one former student.

Jackson said the structure resembles a "lean-to," with a centerpole and logs leaned and secured against it.

Although Jackson would not reveal the location or dimensions of the stack, he said it was "puny" compared to the 1997 Bonfire.

"It's like the size of an adolescent child compared to an adult," Jackson said.

On Tuesday, Director of Residence Life Ron Sasse announced that rumors of an off-campus Bonfire built by Hotard Hall residences had been investigated by Residence Life and that the search turned up nothing.

Schuyler Houser, student body president and a member of the 2002 Bonfire Planning Committee, said an off-campus Bonfire might possibly impede the planning process for a University-approved, on-campus fire.

"I really don't know what effect this will have on Bonfire 2002," Houser said. "It will certainly open discussion that could set back the process. I hope that students are considering all the ramifications of this."

Jackson said safety and leadership were emphasized in the building process of the stack.

"Safety was the major thing," Jackson said. "The plans were approved by a professional engineer. There was an absolute zero tolerance of drinking. Everybody was monitored at all times."

"The collapse was shared by thousands of people," Hand said. "There's nothing that helps the grieving more than to receive support from people who care."

Janice Kerlee said she blames the lack of an official observation this year on the

night, and the other two families were represented by close friends.

Before the service last year, Neva Hand, mother of Bonfire victim Jamie Hand, told reporters that the families needed to share the moment with students.

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Families: A&M should have memorial

By SOMMER BUNCE
THE BATTALION

Families of the victims of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse said they are disappointed that Texas A&M administrators chose not to have an official memorial service on the two-year anniversary of the collapse this Sunday.

Administrators announced in early October that the University was not holding a memorial service on Nov. 18. Instead, Student Body President Schuyler Houser said, students would

individually remember the collapse victims.

"Students don't want to have to relive it again and again," Houser said in October. "Students just want to get through it in their own way and not go through another big ceremony and relive those painful memories."

The families said memories are all they have.

Janice Kerlee, mother of Bonfire victim Timothy Kerlee, Jr., said she and other families were saddened that the University has not planned a memorial service.

"I was hoping it would become a University tradition," she said. "It still may continue, through the students, but I know we and a lot of parents are disappointed."

The A&M Traditions Council handed out more than 40,000 candles to students attending the memorial held last year on the Polo Fields at the site of the Nov. 18, 1999 collapse.

Students began gathering shortly after midnight in the cold rain for the ceremony that began at 2:42 a.m., the time Bonfire fell in 1999. Ten of the 12 victims' families were present that

night, and the other two families were represented by close friends.

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