

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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The fire within

Student Bonfire seeks to build unity, rekindle the flame of Bonfire tradition

By Jessica Lenchner
THE BATTALION

When Luke Cheatham was a freshman in 1999, he loaded for Aggie Bonfire with Walton Hall. Every week after the load, Cheatham and his best friend, Julio, went to the Sbis Dining Hall and used two meal plans to get a double Whataburger, fries, apple pie, chips and a soft drink.

Both would heartily finish their large meals because they were so hungry after their hard work.

Along with the fulfillment of putting in a day's worth of muscle and sweat, Cheatham, a senior civil engineering major, said participating in Bonfire led to making lifelong friends who would stand beside him on his wedding day and learning wonderful things such as leadership and teamwork.

Cheatham was on the Polo Fields during the early morning hours of Nov. 18, 1999, when Bonfire collapsed, killing 12 Aggies and injuring 27 others. He said although everyone reacted differently to the horrific event, he hoped to preserve the good aspects of Aggie Bonfire.

"For me, I just wanted to make sure that all the good things that came from Bonfire didn't get lost," he said. "Bonfire was about freshmen and the seniors passing leadership qualities on to them."

Last fall, Cheatham realized he would be leaving Texas A&M soon and wanted to pass something on to future Aggies, so he helped initiate Unity Project. This off-campus bonfire is designed to rebuild the treasured Aggie tradition with emphasis on Aggie values, unity and safety.

Beth Weisinger, a crew chief and sophomore accounting major, said Unity Project was a success last November. The logs, formed in the shape of a longhorn with its horns sawed off, went up in flames before thousands on a chilly night last November.

"Burn was an amazing feeling," Weisinger said. "I get chills just thinking about it. I've done lots, but this stands out. You work so hard and come together with people you barely know."

Students have begun to work on Unity Project this year, now called Student Bonfire, which is scheduled to burn on Nov. 22.

Jim Bouse, a Student Bonfire leader and senior agricultural development major, said he couldn't wait for cut to start on Oct. 11.

"Nobody slept before the first day of cut because we were so excited," Bouse said. "That's the fun part working next to your fellow Aggies."

Cheatham said the feeling he had last year at first cut was priceless. "It's the best feeling in the world to walk out there, smell the same smells, pick up an axe and get dirty," Cheatham said. "The feelings I

have working on (Student Bonfire) are the exact same as they were working on Bonfire in 1999."

Bouse, a third-generation Aggie, said the thought of bringing Bonfire back in some way drives him to participate in Student Bonfire. He grew up talking about Bonfire every Thanksgiving and planned to attend in 1999.

"Since I got here in 2000, the campus has died," Bouse said. "It's not the place it used to be.

People don't say howdy very much. One of the main reasons is because Bonfire's gone. It just seemed natural for me to get involved with Unity Project."

Cheatham said Bonfire belongs to the students, so it was their decision to keep the tradition going with Student Bonfire and he's glad they chose to do so.

"I'm overjoyed that we've been able to bring back the good that's been missing since Bonfire has been gone," Cheatham said. "I would love to be able to bring my kids to A&M one day and say, 'This is what's so important to Dad and how I met my friends.'"

Weisinger said she hopes the tradition will continue, too, and is most looking forward to passing the experience on to the freshmen this year.

"Working on Unity Project was the most powerful experience of my freshman year, and it's my duty to pass it on," she said. "It'd be selfish of me not to. You really can't see the true meaning of it without going out and putting your own sweat into it."

Individual groups come together for the common cause of building the bonfire that unites us all, Weisinger said, who has a picture of last year's Unity Project hanging on the ceiling above her bed.

"I see it every morning and every night, and it reminds me of the Aggie spirit," she said. "It brightens my day and shows hard work, dedication and heart."

Bouse said it's incredible what just a few people can do when they work together.

"The unity it builds is amazing," Bouse said. "Meeting people, working with them and solving problems are what the real world is all about."

Rachal Bowers, a junior marketing major, attended the Unity Project bonfire last year and said she feels lucky that people took the time and effort to put it together.

"The most memorable part of that night was just standing there in a sea of people watching the flames," Bowers said. "It was seeing everyone from freshmen to seniors to Old Ags to families coming together to celebrate a great tradition."

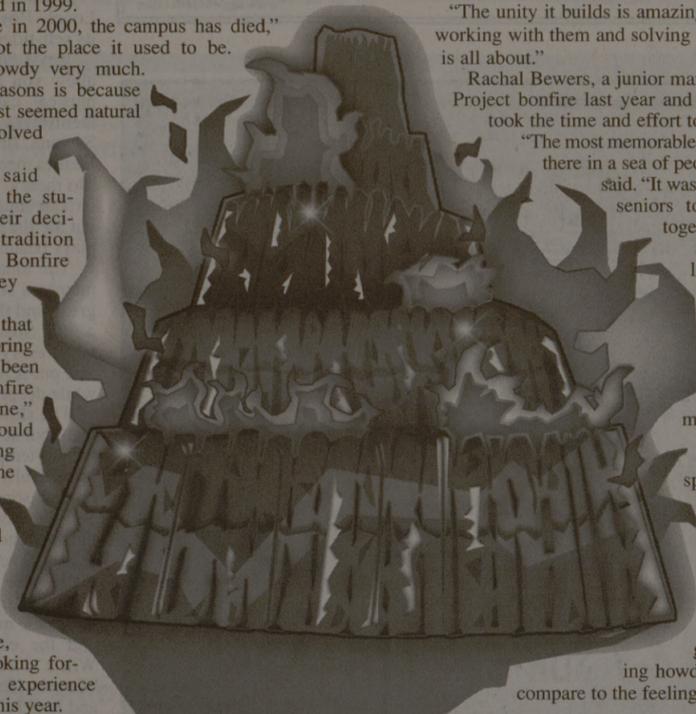
Seeing Unity Project bonfire burn last year brought many emotions to Cheatham. He said it helped bring some closure to all the feelings he had for those lost in the 1999 tragedy. Old Ags came up and thanked him for bringing back what they'd missed for so long, he said.

"Unity Project shows the absolute truest form of the Aggie spirit I've ever known," he said. "Burn last year was like having the spirit all around you. It's such an amazing experience that I encourage everyone to do it at least one time."

Cheatham said students can feel the Aggie spirit at football games and yell practice and hearing howdy around campus, but they don't compare to the feeling he had at burn.

"It's something not duplicated anywhere else in life," he said. "Bonfire and Unity Project symbolize everything good about my experience at A&M," Cheatham said. "They show why I wanted to come to school here, everything true to my heart and my best memories from A&M."

"The two greatest things I've gotten from A&M are my wife and Bonfire," he added, "so you can see it's pretty important."



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