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Friday, November 19, 1999

Support shown by students, parents, alumni

Aggies voice support for university's beloved traditions

By Deborah Martinez and Cynthia Hodnett
Caller-Times

When the Aggie Bonfire toppled early Thursday morning, Aggie spirits everywhere came down with it.

"It's just real heartbreaking that a real important tradition could cost so many lives," said local attorney and '83 A&M graduate Tres Wright.

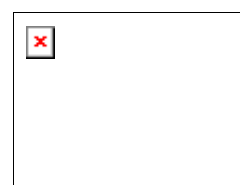
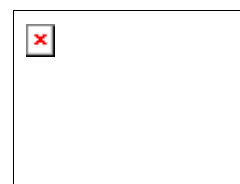
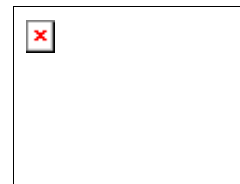
"You have to go to A&M to really appreciate the bond. It becomes ingrained in you. No matter where Aggies are, it's the same. Our traditions are about the meaning of integrity, honesty, brotherhood and sisterhood."

Blood drives across the state were set up Thursday following the tragedy, which killed 11 Aggies and injured more than two dozen more.

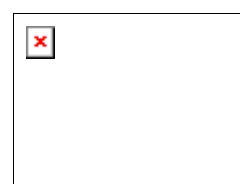
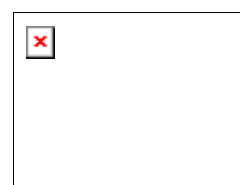
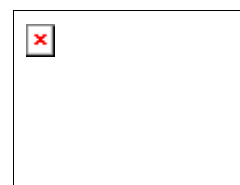
Among the donors was Texas A&M University System Regent Anne Armstrong, who lives near Kingsville. Giving blood was her way of showing support for her fellow Aggies, she said.

The tragedy occurred at about 2:30 a.m. Thursday when the 40-foot pyramid of logs erected for Texas A&M's traditional football bonfire trembled and tumbled down. The bonfire is built every year beginning in August in anticipation of the Aggies' Thanksgiving week game with archrival University of Texas. It is lit the night before the big showdown.

Lisa Sattem, a local resident who graduated from A&M in 1995, said she was devastated when she heard the news during her morning routine before work. She



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immediately thought about her younger sister, Lynda Oliveira, who is a sophomore at A&M.

'Horrible semester'

Luckily, Oliveira was safe and sound.

"I was getting ready for work this morning and I was really scared for my little sister," Sattem said. "I'm sure everyone had that kind of reaction, scared for their kids and sisters and friends.

"It's so sad this had to happen with bonfire. Bonfire always brings everyone together. All new Aggies, old Aggies and parents. This is something that A&M was building together and it just crumbled."

Oliveira, who graduated from Carroll High School in 1998, said the tragedy is almost too much to handle for a student body still reeling from two other tragedies this semester.

On Sept. 18, five people were killed in the crash of a plane used by a Texas A&M-connected skydiving club. On Oct. 10, six students walking to a fraternity party near campus were killed by a pickup whose driver had fallen asleep.

"This has been a horrible semester," Oliveira said. "Everyone is depressed and we're just praying. It's just a loss that we feel so strongly. We're a big campus but a small community."

'Every student affected'

Abigail Werneke, a Calallen High School graduate and senior psychology major at A&M, said prayer is helping the students. For a deeply religious student body, of which thousands get together every Tuesday night for a bible study group, this is a time they need to count on God more than ever, Werneke said.

"God is moving on this campus," she said. "Every Tuesday night, 5,000 students come together to praise God and learn about Jesus. We just have to seek God's continued faithfulness in this time. The tragedy will affect every student at A&M. The healing process is just now going to begin."

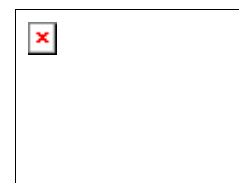
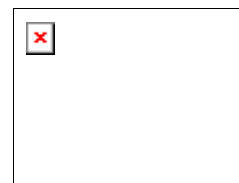
Students and faculty at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi said they were saddened and shocked to hear the news about the tragedy in College Station.

"When I heard about it on the news, I couldn't believe that something like that had happened, especially with so many people involved," said junior Andrew Richardson, 22. "To lose your life in something that was supposed to be a happy time is really sad."

A&M tradition

"It is very sad for something like this to occur while they were trying to keep up a tradition," said senior Jennifer Brauner, 22. "Hopefully, they will be able to take the necessary steps to make sure that people are OK and that they find some who are still alive."

Tally Bartlett, a 22-year-old-senior, grew up in Boerne and often made a two-hour drive to College Station with her friends to enjoy activities near the bonfires.



"My first thought is that I had hoped that no one from my hometown was involved in it," Bartlett said.

"I called my boyfriend to find out if any of his friends were there, and he said no and I was relieved."

Bartlett said bonfires were a tradition for many people who attended the college and who lived near the campus.

"It is like a huge party where you go to have fun," she said. "No one expected anything bad to happen behind something that everyone felt was positive."

A&M-CC to review policy

Mari M. Fuentes-Martin, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi associate dean of students, said it could take months for students and faculty at College Station to deal with the tragedy.

"There really isn't one explanation of what caused this to happen," Fuentes-Martin said.

Fuentes-Martin said she wondered if the tradition should continue. "It is a hard decision for them to make because many people have fond memories of it and that safety must be considered," she said.

Bonfires are not usually built at A&M-Corpus Christi, Fuentes-Martin said. However, the school's student government had planned to build a 10-foot tall bonfire during homecoming events in February for its men's and women's basketball teams, she said.

School officials will meet after Thanksgiving to review safety issues and to discuss the tragedy at College Station, she said.

Parents pray

The catastrophe affects parents in a way that is just beyond words, said U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz, D-Corpus Christi. His son, Solomon P. Ortiz, is a 22-year-old agricultural business junior at the university.

Even though his son was not directly involved with the tragedy, Ortiz said he couldn't get over the news Thursday.

"Early this morning, my press secretary called me and said 'There was an accident at A&M, and that some kids had been killed.' My heart started pounding," Ortiz said. "I called and called my boy. It was about 6 a.m. He finally answered. I knelt down and prayed, I thanked God my boy was okay. I can't imagine what I would do if my child had been killed. I really feel for the parents of those kids . . . all day long I have had a heavy burden in my heart for the families of those kids. My prayers go to them."

Value of life

Joe McComb, a Nueces County Commissioner, said his son Justin was supposed to be working on the bonfire when it collapsed. Instead, Justin worked on the bonfire until midnight, then studied and went to his dorm at 2 a.m. He called his parents around 3 a.m. to let them know he was safe.

Justin is in the Corps of Cadets, which is a driving

force behind the bonfire tradition.

"He would have been there," McComb said. "His group was supposed to work from midnight to 6 a.m., but they switched with another unit. One of the juniors in his company was killed, so he's had a really rough day. I think he realized how quickly life can be taken from you."

Lost friends

Kleberg County Commissioner David Rosse, a 1975 A&M graduate who was in the corps, said his son, Oscar, was also traumatized Thursday. Also a corps member, Oscar Rosse, lost two friends in the accident.

"He knows two of the boys who got killed," David Rosse said. "Right now I just have a lump in my throat. My son was in tears every time I talked to him today. It's a very, very sad situation."

David Rosse said he had planned to attend bonfire, but instead will now drive to College Station this weekend if a memorial service is held for the students killed.

"Unless someone has ever participated in bonfire, they don't understand the importance and tradition and the meaning it has for the university," Rosse said. "This is going to be very difficult for the whole campus. College Station is a very hometown community . . . When things happen, the whole community feels it."

But Anne Armstrong said the school will ultimately pull through together.

"We'll be fine," she said. "We will prevail."

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