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Bonfire tragedy stuns Aggie community

In seven frantic seconds, the Texas A&M University Bonfire collapsed before dawn Thursday, taking the lives of at least 11 of its creators and leaving a wound in the heart of Aggieland.

Most of those killed were working on the top level of the 40-foot stack of logs when it crumbled without warning just before 2:30 a.m. Thursday.

Twenty-eight students were injured as one of Texas A&M University's most prized traditions buckled, including four students who had to be extracted from the pile of more than 5,000 logs.

The students killed in the accident include: Jeremy Richard Frampton, a senior from Turlock, Calif.; Jamie Lynn Hand, a freshman from Henderson; Christopher Lee Heard, a freshman from Houston; Lucas John Kimmel, a freshman from Corpus Christi; Bryan Allan McClain, a freshman from San Antonio; Chad Anthony Powell, a sophomore from Keller; Jerry Don Self, a sophomore from Arlington; Nathan Scott West, a sophomore from Bellaire; Miranda Adams, a sophomore from Pasadena, Texas; and Michael Ebanks, a freshman.

One former student also was killed, Christopher David Breen of Austin, who graduated 1997 and once was active in building Bonfire. It was unclear why he was working at the site where, at the time of the accident, as many as 70 students hung from safety balts while working.

Two of the bodies remained pinned in the wreckage well into the night. Crews removed the last body, that of Adams, at about 1:00 a.m. Friday.

Authorities said it was "more than likely" that no others remained trapped under the small mountain of logs.

Along with several hundred others helping, junior Daniel Nobles was asked to leave the inside of the perimeter at about 4:30 p.m.

"I think they knew at that point that there probably wasn't hope for those left inside," Nobles said as his friends gathered in clusters with tear-soaked faces. Many stood helplessly, not knowing what to do next.

"This is such a helpless feeling," said Nobles, whose neighbor was killed in the disaster. "Everyone out here helping is a hero right along with the students who died this morning. They will never be forgotten by us. This is a huge school, but this is like a death in our family. How can we ever forget what happened here?"

Structural engineers worked side-by-side with rescue workers, though with a different mission.

Lifted by cranes, firefighters were armed with chainsaws to cut through wires binding the logs, while engineers, along with the University Police Department, began a tedious investigation into what caused the logs to crater. The only other time in its 90-year history that Bonfire fell was in 1994, but the reason was well-known: torrential rains soaked the area.

Four bodies were recovered soon after Thursday's violent collapse. But the last two students rescued within seven hours of the accident paved the way for hope that the lives others who were unaccounted for would be spared.

Those hopes faded as one by one, bodies, covered in white sheets, were carefully pulled from the wreckage and loaded into hearses waiting at the perimeter.

Separated by yellow police tape, more than 2,000 students gathered throughout the day inside and around the perimeter of the Bonfire site. Those allowed inside did what they've done for weeks, but this time in reverse: They carried the logs away from the pyramid after cranes and firefighters gently lowered the lumber to the ground.

More than a hundred rescue workers from Brazos Valley and around the state worked in shifts well into the night removing bodies and searching for possible survivors.

College Station Fire Department spokesman Bart Humphreys said the effort likely would continue into the morning hours.

"This is a slow, slow process," he said. "It's like pick-up-sticks. Lifting each log is critical and every move affects another log. We don't want to further injure anyone or risk hurting the workers. They are taking this apart log by log."

An endless stream of students made the pilgrimage out to the site where the Bonfire was exactly one week away from completion. It would have stood the standard 55 feet tall with as many as 7,000 logs. The effort is meant to incite spirit among A&M's 43,500-member student body just before the annual game between A&M and its rival, the University of Texas.

It would have been burned to the ground in a Thanksgiving-evening ceremony that typically draws 70,000 wide-eyed spectators, but A&M President Ray Bowen said there would be no Bonfire this year.

Bonfire was not lit one other time in its history -- in 1963 after President Kennedy's assassination.

"It is only fitting that the Bonfire not be held next week," Bowen said. "Will it be held next year? That will be answered in the coming weeks or months after careful review of what transpired. We don't have all the answers today. Our primary concern is getting those students all out from underneath the stack."

Rusty Thompson, who has been the faculty adviser to Bonfire for nine years, said Bonfire is built solely by students, though three volunteers from construction companies were on-site as advisers at the time of the accident.

"Much has been said here today about the fact this is an all-student-run event and the lack of supervision," Thompson said. "That's simply not so. The folks out here who build this have the expertise and training where safety is their number one concern."

He said the tradition that builds friendships and camaraderie is like no other. It has a hierarchy in which the students carefully select its leaders from among their own. Cadets and civilian students build the stack after cutting the timber at the beginning of the semester and moving it to the site.

"The people in charge are called red pots, and those red pots know exactly what they're doing," said Thompson, who left bonfire site at 10:30 p.m. Wednesday. "I've never once had a concern that these students did not know what they were doing. They are true professionals."

Later, when addressing a question from the media about "no adults" being on the scene, Thompson stated that the students are adults. His response drew the only light moment of the day as hundreds of students who gathered nearby hollered the traditional Aggie "whoop" in unison.

Rumors had spread throughout the day across the field and back into the lap of Thompson: "No, the students were not playing around on the stack. We know nothing right now about rumors that it was swaying, we don't think the crane hit the stack and we have no concrete information about the centerpole snapping."

Junior Meg Holton said she is confident the answers will be found, but she hopes the tradition is not abandoned in the process.

"The people who build Bonfire have a distinct passion for what they do," said Holton, whose boyfriend is a red pot and was not injured in the accident. "It's hard for people who don't know anything about A&M to understand why we get so fired up about Bonfire.

"I feel that those who died here today would not want the tradition to die with them," Holton said. "That would be the last thing they would want."

Andrew Sengler, a sophomore who lives across the street from the site, heard neighbors screaming at 3 a.m. that the Bonfire had fallen, but he thought it was a prank by University of Texas fans or students.

"I came out here and it looked like something from the L.A. riots," he said. "It's horrible to see all these ambulances, police and then all those hearses."

Like many students, Sengler was told of the severity of the accident by his parents living hundreds of miles away. Phone lines were jammed as parents tried to contact their children and many parents drove directly to the command site when they couldn't locate their child.

But the parents of each of those who died were notified either by university officials or police officers. None learned of their child's fate at the site.

There was an obvious numbness blanketing the faces of those who watched the activity for hours on end. Many knelt down and prayed with strangers as psychologists with the A&M Student Counseling Services aided grieving students. Several students clutched their Bibles as they linked arms and asked God to help the rescue workers save one more life.

"I know a few of the people who died," said a teary-eyed Carrie Shelnick, a junior who was working on the first level of stack 1 1/2 hours prior to the accident. "This is devastating. It's such a freak accident that I still can't believe it happened. I'm just completely numb."

Freshmen Kyle Bigelow said he knew that feeling well.

He and hundreds of other students showed up at the site within 15 minutes of the collapse in hopes of helping. The red pots and other Bonfire leaders were allowed to stay and help rescue crews sift through the rubble, but most of the others were asked to leave.

Bigelow returned several hours later and, as with scores of others, including football team players, they moved the dismantled logs out of the way to clear paths for rescue crews.

"As always, we communicated with each step we took," he said as other crews barked orders to lift and drop logs in a busy fashion. "This, more than anything else, probably helped a lot of people keep their mind off the fact those people were trapped inside the Bonfire."

Red Cashion, a former NFL referee who lives in Brazos County, couldn't help but recall the times he spent building Bonfire in the years before his graduation from A&M in 1953.

"I look out here at this crowd and marvel at how the student body and this community have pulled together in this horrible tragedy," Cashion said. "Everyone I see has a long face and sorrow in their eyes. Everyone is hurting, not just here, but all Aggies, wherever they are, are hurting. We feel so badly for the families who lost a loved one."

Sophomore Caleb Hill, who fell from the first of four log stack, returned to the site several hours after he was treated for a fractured wrist and broken nose.

"Nobody could have predicted this could have happened," Hill said. "We had no indication anything was wrong. It happened in an instant and there was nothing anyone of us could do to help. I had to come out here."