



# The Dallas Morning News Bonfire tragedy

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## Bonfire tragedy highlights Aggies' special bond

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By David McLemore and Laura Beil / The Dallas Morning News

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COLLEGE STATION, Texas - Each fall, Texas A&M students stand while their team is on the field. They yell with one voice against their football foes.

Last week, freshman students and graduates from decades past wept as one over the deaths of young men and women most had never met.



Andy Scott / DMN

Visitors walk silently along the fence surrounding the dismantled bonfire Saturday morning, viewing the items left in memory of the 12 students killed when the structure collapsed.

All because they're Aggies.

Friday morning, John Slack was resplendent in his Corps of Cadets uniform and knee-high senior boots. He gazed past barricades marking the site where four stories of stacked bonfire lumber fell, killing 12 students and injuring 27.

"I want to imprint this on my mind," he said. "I want to remember how this tragedy didn't get us down, how we, as Aggies kept on going.

"This won't kill the Aggie spirit. This is the Aggie spirit."

An unusual place, this A&M.

Aggies can tell you about Aggie spirit, what it is and how it has changed their lives. They can tell you about how it connects them to each other and to a place in Central Texas 90 miles from nowhere. But they can't tell you why it exists and how it is passed along by generations of graduates.

"It's the hardest thing to explain to those who haven't had the experience. I might as well try to explain faith," said state Sen. Jeff Wentworth, Class of '67. "It is a bond with all Aggies, past and present. It's something that begins freshman year and goes on forever."

Aggie spirit comes from sharing rituals and traditions as puzzling to outsiders as a distant religion. It comes from years of being seen by some as underdogs, the butt of jokes, the subject of scandals and being a bit odd, compared with students at other colleges.

"We stick together because nobody else stuck with us," said Ben Agnor, a 1958 graduate who lives in Marshall, Texas.

### Shared language

Aggie spirit comes from sharing a lingo that no one else understands: Fish Camp. 12th Man. Two-percenter. Red Pot.

"The ritualism and the things associated with it provide a bond," said Dr. Don Albrecht, who teaches sociology at A&M. "Until you've been here, and you've been inside it, you can't understand

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it."

About two decades ago, with a fresh graduate degree from his home state of Utah, Dr. Albrecht experienced his first glimpse of the kinship among Aggies when his family's car broke down in Albuquerque, N.M. The garage wouldn't take an out-of-town check for the repairs. Then he mentioned to the owner that he had just accepted a teaching job at A&M.

"He said, 'I graduated from A&M. Sure, we'll take your check,' " Dr. Albrecht recalled.

The bond may have roots in the school's beginnings as a military institution, said Mike Arrington, a 1968 A&M graduate who lives outside Nashville, Tenn. "I think it was the Corps of Cadets who fashioned a sense of community."

Aggies will quickly tell you that there is no such thing as an ex-Aggie.

"What do you sing? 'True to each other, as Aggies can be,' " said Mr. Agnor, quoting a phrase from "The Spirit of Aggieland." "You start feeling that."

He recites in entirety another tune, once sung after the end of each losing football game. He takes a deep breath. "I sing that today, and it brings tears to my eyes."

### **Offers of help**

More than 250,000 have graduated from A&M since its founding in 1876. Of that number, more than half have graduated since 1982, according to data from the Association of Former Students.

Thursday, after the bonfire disaster, the association's headquarters at A&M was flooded with hundreds of phone calls and e-mails from A&M graduates, asking what they could do.

"We had offers of equipment, and many volunteered to help in the rescue effort," said Amy Glass of the association staff. "The central thread of each offer was the great desire to help and the frustration of not knowing what to do."

There are 175,000 former A&M students in Texas, 50,000 more spread across the nation and 7,000 in other countries.

Parents also are eligible to be part of the Association of Former Students.

"We don't call the great circle of Aggies 'The Network' by accident," said Patrick Williams, class of '92 and director of campus programs for the association. "Being an Aggie is a lifelong experience.

"Freshmen are encouraged to be in contact with former students, to know they can rely on them. We don't see alumni as a checkbook to contact once a year. They are an invaluable resource."

As Thursday's tragedy resonated throughout the student body, Mr. Williams said, it was more than a shocking exposure to the fragility and uncertainty of life. It will become part of the A&M experience, he said.

"The current students were stunned by the reaction of the outside community. They learned they were part of a bigger whole. They didn't know so many people would care and offer help," Mr. Williams said.

"When they leave College Station, they will take away their responsibility to give something back to others."

The sense of grief spread across campus and throughout the heart of Aggieland in palpable waves.

Mr. Williams remembers walking through the brick square outside Rudder Tower at 1 a.m. Friday. A student sat on the steps, playing "Amazing Grace" on his saxophone.

### **Bonfire is the heart**

"This has been a tough year at A&M. Just in two months, we've had several students and former students die in terrible accidents near campus," Mr. Williams said.

Still, he said, "these deaths were special. They happened here. They happened at home."

Mr. Wentworth heard the news on the radio in San Antonio as he took his child to school Thursday. "I was stunned. It was like hearing a family member died," he said. Later, he wept.

Cementing these extraordinary connections among A&M graduates are the traditions.

"The fact it happened at bonfire, the heart of Aggie spirit, only added to the grief I felt," Mr. Wentworth added.

"Bonfire is the heart of it for many Aggies," said senior Jason Yeager, 22. Mr. Yeager was among the thousands of students who assembled around the stack area Friday, watching silently as huge cranes lifted logs one by one to uncover the dead.

"It's not just about beating UT," he said. "It's how we, as a community, come together as family."

Most Aggies - and many others - will say that traditions make A&M a special place. But traditions aren't the sole source of Aggie spirit.

"I do think there is something different about A&M," said Sam Ratcliffe, a Texas history expert at Southern Methodist University. "Other schools have traditions, but not traditions that permeate them and go as deeply as these do."

Said Mr. Williams: "Traditions are the mechanics of something much deeper. Aggies have spirit not because of what they find here but what they bring, the character and integrity that the students have. A&M pays special effort to nourish that while they're here.

"At A&M, you learn quickly that as an individual, you contribute to the greatness of A&M. You are encouraged to participate in the development of the educational process, not just be on some academic assembly line," Mr. Williams said. "Other universities have their traditions. Other schools have alumni who love the school. But at A&M, you're part of a bigger whole."

### **Faculty feel bond**

For faculty members, the pervasive sense of community has greater expression at A&M than at other institutions in their experience, said statistics professor Dr. Thomas Wehrly, who has been at Texas A&M since 1976.

"As a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina some years ago, I found that students there took pride in the academic excellence of their school but didn't identify with each other as they do at A&M," said Dr. Wehrly, who has degrees from the universities of Michigan and Wisconsin.

"The Midwestern schools I attended were certainly proud of their traditions, but not to the extent as at A&M," he said. "While faculty members may question individual traditions, the student body's spirit formed by those traditions is something much appreciated."

Ms. Glass stressed that there is no cynicism about traditions at A&M. "You know they are deeply, deeply felt by thousands of people. They are the first thread that ties us together.

"Every student since 1909 has had some connection with bonfire. They worked on it or participated in the ceremony or were part of it in some way," Ms. Glass said.

And to an Aggie on the inside, there's no preoccupation with what the outside world thinks. A&M, in fact, has long been seen as the outsider school, the brunt of "Aggie jokes" that depict a world of the slow-witted and clueless.

"We enjoy the attention," Mr. Williams said. "While people are

looking at something to poke fun at, we're making progress."

Even Aggies enjoy Aggie jokes. In retort, a favorite on campus is:  
"What do you call an Aggie five years after graduation?"

"Boss."

"I tell Aggie jokes. I love them," Ms. Glass said. "But I've never understood their appeal outside A&M."

"People think they're mocking Aggies, but really, it's just another way of separating us from other schools. It makes us special."

Friday, as flowers piled up and wilted at the bonfire site, the Aggie spirit remained as ethereal as dreams, resisting easy explanations. It is, as the Aggies sing in their hymn, "a spirit can ne'er be told."

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