

In Memory... The Aggie Bonfire Memorial

There's a spirit can never be told....

Approaching the entrance to the Texas A&M University campus, it's impossible to overlook, just as it is impossible not to be overwhelmed by the events that happened in that spot five years

ago that November day. That was the day when anyone unaware of the tragedy that had unfolded in those early morning hours could walk on campus and instantly know something was horribly wrong. That was the

day it was impossible not to literally feel the grief—a tangible sorrow amplified by the tens of thousands of grieving Aggies who were all too painfully aware that the landscape of Aggieland had irrevocably changed.

Perhaps it is appropriate that the physical landscape of Texas A&M has changed as well. The Polo Fields remain absent of any signs of a stack, as they have been since November 18, 1999, when the 2-million pound Bonfire stack collapsed, killing 12 Aggies and injuring 27, but the fields are now the site of the university's newest additions, Tradition Plaza, History Walk and Spirit Ring—collectively, the Bonfire Memorial.

The simple, yet symbolic, stone and bronze memorial is expected to draw thousands of Aggies from around the nation to Texas A&M for its formal dedication on the November 18, marking the five-year anniversary of the collapse.

Selected from nearly 200 entries in a year-long international competition coordinated by faculty in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design of Texas A&M's College of Architecture, the memorial

design was the unanimous choice of a blue-chip, nine-member jury whose members included leading design professionals as well as Texas A&M student, faculty and alumni representatives.

It was designed by Overland Partners, Inc. of San Antonio, headed by Robert L. Shemwell, a 1982 Texas A&M graduate. In addition to Shemwell, principal in the firm, the team included four other Texas A&M graduates—Steve Fong '85, Ryan Jones '00, Michael Rey '99, Jeff Russell '87—along with 22 other staff members.

The memorial gives form to three main conceptual ideas. The entrance plaza informs visitors of a tradition that brought people together. The connecting path traces the 89-year history of Bonfire preceding the collapse, and the continuous ring shares the spirit that united individuals and made them a part of something greater than themselves.

At the plaza, two vertical planes serve to create a sense of separation from the outer world, enhancing the intimate and personal experience for visitors. Spirit Ring can be viewed in the distance, beyond the lower

wall, while the inside of the higher wall displays the lines of "The Last Corps Trip," the poem that was traditionally recited prior to the lighting of each year's Bonfire.

As visitors make their way through the plaza and approach the Spirit Ring, they travel north along History Walk, a stone walkway that serves as a timeline for the history of Bonfire at Texas A&M. Eighty-nine stones represent each year that Bonfire was a part of Texas A&M tradition. A break in the time line in 1963 indicates the year President John F. Kennedy was assassinated—the only year prior to 1999 that Bonfire did not burn. Notched in each of the 3,500-pound stones is a space denoting November of each year, the month that Bonfire burned.

Surrounding the site of the 1999 Bonfire, 12 stone portals stand, oriented in the direction of the hometowns of the fallen men and women. The granite portals have an imposing, solemn presence on the lush green fields on which they stand. Just as these 16-foot tall monolith-like gateways are unable to be overlooked, the memories of who and what they represent are unable to be forgotten, nor

would Aggies choose to forget. Bronze gateways inside each portal reflect on the events, emotions, life and spirit of the individual whom the portal represents.

Twenty-seven stone panels—one for each injured student—connect these portals to complete the circle, which measures the exact size of the safety perimeter around the collapsed stack. At the center of the circle sits a bronze marker in the location of the 1999 centerpole, inscribed with the date and time of the collapse and also serving as a directional compass point to orient visitors as they look through each portal in the direction of the students' hometowns.

While each of the individual forms comprising the Spirit Ring symbolizes an Aggie, the Ring itself represents the common bond connecting each one to something greater than themselves: the Aggie Spirit. It's a spirit imbued even in the trees surrounding the memorial, which were donated by forest science alumni from Texas A&M who raised enough money in one week to purchase the 12 landscape-size live oak trees.

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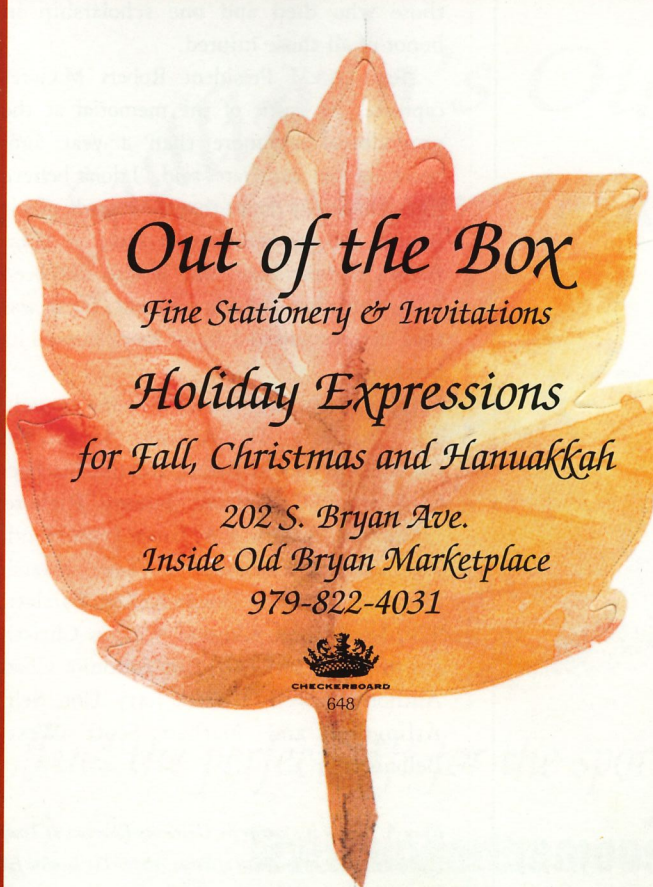


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aggiespirit

Replant about getting some trees for a ceremony to honor their memory, the first ones I thought about for this project were the forest science alums," said retired Texas Forest Service Director Bruce Miles, who graduated with a degree in forestry in 1957.

It's a spirit that was evident to anyone who witnessed the hundreds of items left along the perimeter fence line by the Aggies who converted the perimeter boundary into a makeshift memorial during that time. Covering nearly the entire length of the fence line, items such as notes, letters, cards, flowers, crosses, decorated "pots" and even Aggie Rings were left by those who, unable to turn back the hands of time, chose instead to never forget.

And in the aftermath of the collapse, it's the same spirit that fueled the generosity of Aggies everywhere who gave to the Bonfire Relief Fund, which allowed Texas A&M to assist students and families with expenses resulting from the accident, such as travel and medical costs. Managed by The Association of Former Students, the fund also provided financial support to the memorial as well as enabled the endowing of 12 memorial scholarships named for those who died and one scholarship in honor of all those injured.

Texas A&M President Robert M. Gates captured the spirit of the memorial at the groundbreaking more than a year ago. Speaking that day, Gates said, "I don't believe there can be any doubt that the tragedy of our Bonfire collapse will forever stand as Texas A&M's darkest hour, but it also has been called our most shining moment, for it was then that our vaunted Aggie Spirit burned its brightest."

The 12 Aggies who died in the tragedy are: Miranda D. Adams, Santa Fe; Christopher David Breen, Austin; Michael S. Ebanks, Carrollton; Jeremy Richard Frampton, Turlock, CA; Jamie Lynn Hand, Henderson; Christopher Lee Heard, Houston; Timothy Doran Kerlee, Bartlett, TN; Lucas John Kimmel, Corpus Christi; Bryan Allan McClain, San Antonio; Chad Anthony Powell, Keller; Jerry Don Self, Arlington; and Nathan Scott West, Bellaire. *i*

Ryan A. Garcia is a writer for University Relations at Texas A&M and a 1999 graduate of Texas A&M. The Bonfire fell during his final semester as a student.

featurestory by Kendra Kingsley

Where the wild things are... Exotic Game Adventurer Scott Smith



One step inside Caldwell native Scott Smith's home, and you'll instantly feel transported to an African safari. Impala, Kudu, Warthog, Eland, Wildebeest, and Gemsbok heads line his walls, and a stunning zebra-skin rug (with the animal's head fully intact) stretches across his living room floor. But Scott says he isn't a trophy hunter. He just likes being outdoors, surrounded by nature, fresh air... and the occasional antelope.

Until he was 15 years old, Scott staked out prime Texas hunting land armed only with a rifle. Soon, however, rifle hunting became too easy for him, and he set out to find a sport that would prove more challenging. He quickly became enraptured with a new weapon of choice, a bow-and-arrow, and became so skilled at consistently hitting his target that he eventually won three gold medals in the Texas Games archery competitions, The Texas State Archery Championship, and placed in the top 25 in the 1996 world championship.

Today, Scott's favorite hunting grounds are a long way (a 41-hour roundtrip flight, to be exact) from Caldwell. He has traveled to South Africa twice since 2000. Here, he stays at Adansonia Safaris, a 2,400-acre camp located

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