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Former Texas A&M president Bowen shares memories of Bonfire collapse

From the Twenty years later: Remembering Bonfire series

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Editor's Note

This story is part of a series remembering those who were affected by the Bonfire collapse on the Texas A&M campus on Nov. 18, 1999. Twelve Aggies were killed and 27 were injured.

Former Texas A&M University President Ray Bowen said he has thought about the victims of the Aggie Bonfire collapse every day since the tragedy on Nov. 18, 1999.

Bowen served as president from 1994 to 2002 and said there are many things from his term that have stayed with him — the collapse being the most heartbreaking.

“There was a lot of sadness and a lot of crying,” Bowen said.

He remembers the call in the middle of the night and rushing to get to the disaster that unfolded on campus. He recalls the funerals he attended with his wife, and the overwhelming grief. Memories from that day are filled with tears and worry, and images of fallen logs, helicopters flying overhead and news station trucks driving in from around the country.

But the community’s response is especially notable, Bowen said.

First responders took action, and students volunteered to help. Professors gave advice on how to move the logs. Lumber companies lent their equipment to help disassemble the stack.

“It’s hard to describe,” Bowen said. “It was chaos, but inside of it there was a very dedicated group of people who assembled fairly quickly.”

In the days that followed the collapse, Bowen said he and others thought there would be an improved future Bonfire on campus, but research showed there was not a safe route that was cost-effective enough to pursue.

Bowen announced in 2002 that the university would not allow Bonfire to be on campus that year, following a two-year suspension of the tradition. As a 1958 A&M graduate who had worked on Bonfire and understood the tradition’s meaning on campus, he said it was a difficult decision.

“My heart does not like what my brain is having to do today,” Bowen said in 2002.

In his announcement, Bowen said that there would not be a Bonfire that year, knowing that someone may decide to change the rule later. But it was “perceived to be a terminal type of decision,” he said.

Students met Bowen with support and opposition. Some student government leaders agreed with the decision, he said, and other students protested it.

But in the end, Bowen said it was the right decision, as he and university officials couldn’t envision risking another disaster.

“It didn’t make too many people happy, but we concluded very early that you couldn’t let the Bonfire define this university,” Bowen said. “Too many people depend on the quality of the education here to have a perception nationally and internationally that the No. 1 priority is restoring that tradition.”

In the days and weeks following the collapse, Bowen attended events around campus to honor the students who died and support those who were injured. From a memorial event in Reed Arena that brought former President George H.W. Bush and Lt. Gov. Rick Perry to campus to several funerals, Bowen was there.

The night before A&M's football game against the University of Texas, a vigil was held at the site of the collapse. Yell Practice at Kyle Field attracted 65,000 people later that night, and Bowen said it was an emotional event with a moving speech from football coach R.C. Slocum.

After he completed his role as president in July 2002, Bowen continued as an engineering professor until he retired in 2010, and was named professor emeritus of mechanical engineering. But retirement didn't disconnect him from the community. Bowen and his wife spend most of their time in Houston, but they have a home in College Station for their visits to Aggieland.

Bowen led the university as president through the largest campus tragedy in its history, but he points out that he was not trained in crisis management as an engineer. Bowen is quick to say he relied heavily on the expertise of "really loyal and dedicated people," from faculty and staff to employees in the president's office who showed up in the middle of the night when the stack fell to answer phones.

But as he recalls the aftermath of the tragedy, Bowen frequently returns to the efforts of local residents. Memories of the people who brought food for volunteers and first responders, and the technology companies that gave away free phone batteries. The generosity and kindness was remarkable, Bowen said.

"So many things went on below the surface," Bowen said. "People talk about the big things and big decisions, but there are a thousand stories of individuals helping the families, the university and the students, just because it was the right thing to do."