THROUGH THE SMOKE, THE SPIRIT SHINES

By Stephanie Jeter Cannon ’06
When wildfires scorched Texas from top to bottom, Aggies were deeply involved—fighting on the front lines, flying overhead, saving animals, providing relief supplies, and finding hope in the ashes.

Since wildfire season began on Nov. 15, 2010, the Texas Forest Service, an agency within The Texas A&M University System, has traveled across Texas to fight fires and care for the state’s forests. During the many trips, several images were captured that tell the story of experts, firefighters and volunteers doing their best to help the state of Texas. All the photos in this eight-page article are courtesy of the Texas Forest Service.
For a while last year, Texas burned.

Scarcely any part of the state was spared. The worst of it gutted portions of Texas from its seaside port to its desert-like panhandle, and the best of it sat within view of the smoke, wondering if it was next.

Dry fields were consumed in hungry gulps, green trees were scarred black in flash flare-ups, vehicles melted into themselves, homes literally disappeared into piles of ash, and mountains glowed orange with flames.

Buried under the smoking wreckage lay something unexpected to many across the state—hope.

As dazed and battered Texans made their way to safety, for many, it was an Aggie who received them. It was an Aggie who clothed them. Aggies put out the blaze. Aggies tended to the injured. Aggies helped put things back together.

There’s not an accurate way to pinpoint when Texas A&M became known for its selfless service. It’s a legacy gifted by the first of Aggies. From its beginning, the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas found much of its identity in what it did for others. The history books track Texas A&M’s record of military service back to the Spanish-American War, and that was in 1898.

With no start date, there must certainly be no end date, so, that’s where our story begins—right in the middle of everything.

**Integrity**

Paul Hannemann ’74 has felt the full, encroaching weight of a fire-filled sky. He has smelled the scorch of a million acres. He’s a student of fire, a learner of how the unpredictable can be used to predict its course.

And he knows what a natural disaster looks like.

The chief of fire operations and department head of incidence response for the Texas Forest Service has been under pressure before. He played bass in the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band, served in the military, and has decades’ worth of firefighting as a base for what he does now.

“But, this was really extreme,” he said.

There were a tremendous number of simultaneous fires happening across the state, Hannemann said—according to the Texas Forest Service, more than 25,000 wildfires that burned 3.8 million acres. The oversight to command the response to those wildfires within the Texas Division of Emergency Management fell on him.

“Different parts of the state were hit,” he said. In April, the Fort Davis Mountains caught on fire. The Rock House Fire burned 314,000 acres, “the largest of the season,” he said, and the longest-lasting. Triggered by a house fire in Marfa, the fire galloped 28 miles in 12 hours. It burned for 30 days.

Within a couple of days, the Possum Kingdom complex went hot with flames, blistering and demolishing homes and property. Then there was another fire north of San Angelo.

Then in September, on the same day that Texas A&M played its football season opener against SMU, the Bastrop fire started. As well as anyone can figure, winds barreled in 30mph gusts, bringing down some trees which collided into electrical lines. Sparks flew and the dry ground took to flames.

While A&M’s football team was successful that day, Bastrop’s defeat made the national news.

Those were the three major ones,” he said, but with fires active across the state, and with volunteers staffing the majority of the fire stations, resources were in short supply.

For 300 days last year, Hannemann picked up the phone for a 10 a.m. daily statewide conference call to talk out
where the next fire would most likely break out. With fire departments and local officials listening in, weather predictions and active fires and dry pastures became a kind of fire horoscope.

When the forecasts read grim, Hannemann called for aircraft to sweep different areas. Pilots with a bird’s-eye view brought back intelligence on what was burning and what was next in the fire’s path. Hannemann helped organize and bring in outside resources—things like the air tankers that dropped the mud-like fire retardant, bulldozers, extra fire engines and extra crews to come join the fight.

His decisions were filled with more variables than can be counted here—but essentially, when the conditions looked right for a breakout, Hannemann started moving those resources closer to where there was likely to be a problem.

When Hannemann smells smoke, his first reaction is fire. It could be smoke off a BBQ pit, he said, but he’s not thinking about the brisket. Just like when he gets a call that wakes him up, or an assignment that keeps him out, he’s not thinking about the debit to his personal life.

Of course, working with so many like-minded Aggies helps shape his view. “I think that Texas A&M epitomizes service to the public,” he said. “The Aggie Network is alive and strong when we deal with things like this.”

Last year, when he encountered another Aggie in the field, they’d click Rings. “We’re living it out,” he said of A&M’s legacy of leadership and service. “That’s the advantage we bring from being from Texas A&M.”

**Loyalty**

The day fire demolished the childhood home of Jillian Blackwell ’08, she and her family were sitting in Kyle Field for the SMU football game. Not long after kickoff, Blackwell’s father kept getting calls—first from a friend, then a neighbor, then they lost track. The phone kept ringing. No one had any specifics, but rumor was, the fire was in their Bastrop neighborhood.

Later, the Blackwell family’s neighbor said he could see the flames over the tops of the tree, and it sounded like a freight train. “It was terrifying,” Blackwell said.

In the minutes, hours and days to come, much would happen.

Five-thousand people would be evacuated, firefighters would spend days reining in the 34,068-acre blaze, and her parents’ home that they wondered about for three days would be one of the more than 1,600 that the fire
consumed. Their home on the corner of McCalister and Kaana Pali was gone, leaving behind nothing but an ash lot dotted with few burnt remains.

Blackwell’s mother is a quilter of bright fabrics and a gardener of colorful flowers and greenery—after the fire, both were reduced to the same color ash as the albums of photos and Blackwell’s father’s 1970s Jeep he had just restored. “Everything is gone,” she said. Or so they thought.

Blackwell grew up knowing she would attend Texas A&M University because of the influence of one man—her grandfather.

The influence of Raymond Blackwell Jr. ’54 made an Aggie out of her father, and a former student out of herself and her sister. “We started going to Aggie football games when I was 5 or 6, and I’m 25 now,” she said.

In Blackwell’s childhood memories of her grandfather, he’s always wearing his Aggie Ring. Worn down into a smooth, detail-less blob, Blackwell’s mom and dad got him a new one for his 50th wedding anniversary. When he passed away in 2006—just shy of Blackwell’s own Ring Day, Raymond was buried with his original Ring. His new one was stored in the Blackwell family home.

When Blackwell’s family was able to return to the area 11 days after the fire, “That was one of the only things my dad was hoping we’d be able to recover. “Everything was gone, just vaporized, but he thought he remembered the general area where it was stored,” she said.

He started digging. After two hours of digging through 18 inches of ash, he started sifting through the remains by hand. Ash fell through his fingers until the Ring was left in the palm of his hand.

“It was definitely the only meaningful thing we recovered and it meant a lot to my family that the Aggie Spirit lived through the fire,” she said.

Leadership

Listen to Bastrop County Judge Ronnie McDonald ’93 talk and you’ll never think of the number 5,000 in the same far-fetched way.

Five thousand—that’s how many people in rural community of Bastrop were evacuated when a line of flames marched outward, swallowing everything in its path.

One thousand, seven hundred—that’s how many homes were destroyed in one of the most destructive wildfires in Texas history.

Each one stings. Each one matters. He knows these people. He runs into them at the grocery store. They’re his neighbors, his friends, his constituents. Bastrop is one of the fastest-growing areas in Texas, but it’s still a place where a walk down the street garners a small-town, “Hi, how’s your family?” he said.

“If I was to describe Bastrop, (I’d say) it’s home.”

It’s a place that understands community, much like another place that lives strong in his heart.

In Aggieland, McDonald says, perceived differences are dropped. “Even though we all come from different backgrounds, we are the Aggies. The Aggies are we,” he said.

True to each other As Aggies can be

In times of plenty, and in trouble, he said, it was Aggies who phoned him asking how to help. It was Aggies who came in when the fire got too big to handle alone. An Aggie flew over the fire so officials would know how the fire was spreading. Aggies in government offered law enforcement. Aggies brought in donations.

And now, when the fire is out but the hard work continues, Aggies have not stopped their support. “The Aggie Network is strong,” said McDonald, a former yell leader.

Looking back now, McDonald can read through the reports and see how it was teamwork that brought the city
through the fire—from the door-to-door knocking that alerted residents to evacuate, to the fight to save a home—and it’s teamwork that will lead to recovery.

“That’s where we are now, in the process of recovery,” he said. Cleaning out debris, removing dead trees, bringing in FEMA, clearing slabs, gathering the resources to rebuild—it’s a slow process, but “Bastrop County is coming back,” he said.

As county judge, it’s his job is to help the town toward recovery. It’s his responsibility to work with the residents, to help ease the mindsets that were charred with devastation and emergency.

“People lost everything,” he said. The first step is to give them hope.

Though it’s not yet time to go back to life and government as usual, there have been bright spots buffed out of the dull burned remains. He calls it trading beauty for ashes. “Something beautiful is going to come out of this fire,” he said.

“A lot of times we don’t know who we are until we come through the fire. Fire purifies us.”

A self-sufficient team of Texas A&M veterinary staff, faculty and students operates this deployable hospital. Called in to offer medical assistance to the animals of Bastrop County, the team of Aggies worked single-mindedly to offer a service to the citizens of Bastrop County and the rescuers working hard to defend it.

Because of their presence, Bissett said, firefighters and first responders no longer had to walk past an injured animal in defeat; they could get it medical care. A burned cat found in the middle of the road, a dog with a broken back, a blistered horse and scalded wildlife—they could be cared for.

“During the day, you’re busy, but during the quiet, you think back to those animals. What did it go through to live?” Bissett said.

The horse with teeth black from smoke, “Just what did that horse go through? Will it survive? Is it even humane to try?”

The ground was black. The trees were charred. Mornings were smoky. The devastation was everywhere.

During the few down moments, Bissett wrote e-mails back to members of his team. “My therapy was writing about it,” he said. One of the memories that he recorded was looking at the websites of the shelters where the animals were being taken after receiving care. They would read the stories of animals reuniting with their owners and cry.

In many cases, all a family had left was that animal that survived, he said.

“We are all in this to save a life,” he wrote, “to make someone’s life a bit better.”

That’s what Aggies do, he said. They respond with excellence.
“Look back at our history and you will see a wonderful story of people who have risen to the occasion and served when others shrank away,” he wrote. “General Rudder, the many Medal of Honor recipients, Dr. Borlaug and our own Dr. Mark Francis to name just a few.”

Whether it was working with Texas Task Force One’s rescue dogs to offer preventative care—which allowed the canine teams to work longer more safely—or being part of returning an animal to its owner, the team of Texas A&M veterinarians stepped up to do the impossible, and succeeded.

Respect

Right around the same time as the Bastrop fires, Darla Marburger ’95 was making plans to travel from her home in Virginia to Bastrop for her 20-year high school reunion.

Watching the nightly news became painful. Her hometown was on fire, she said. Her hometown, where she learned to drive and attended football games and everything else that happens in one’s hometown, was burning into nothing.

Her parents’ home was untouched, but it didn’t matter. This was her hometown.

After about a week of feeling helpless against such great need, she had an idea.

If she was going to make the trip to Bastrop anyway, why not drive it? And if she was driving, why not haul a load of supplies for those who lost everything in the fire?

Why not? She found no reason.

So, with six weeks to pull everything together, Marburger quickly got to work. She contacted her church, got set up with an organization with which she had served in South Africa. Serve a Village organization allowed her to list her idea as an official Village Project, which meant donors could count their gifts as tax deductible. Next thing she knew, a local reporter called and asked her all kinds of questions. Her idea landed on online listservs, and passed all through the area by word of mouth.

She’s told her story a few times now, and this is when the tears normally start to fall.

“I know the people from my home county and I know how great they are and I could just feel their pain,” she said. That the people from her new home wanted to help the people from her old home, well, that’s the best kind of overwhelmed you can be, she said.

It wasn’t just towels and pots and pans that people were donating either. One man offered Marburger his trailer, another rented her a storage unit for less than the going price, a company offered a 50 percent discount to transport the donations, and others sent money to offset the cost—all because an Aggie decided to act.

She loaded the truck wearing an Aggie T-shirt and started the 1,500-mile trip. She rolled into Bastrop on Oct. 22.

The Bastrop County Ministerial Alliance agreed to be the disseminator of all her goods. She had everything that could be needed to set up a house—couches, comforters, beds, a dishwasher, washer and dryers, microwaves, furniture, curtains, sheets, and kitchen goods.

“I contacted my classmates,” she said, as some had lost everything in the fire. “The day that we unloaded the truck,
we helped at least four families,” she said.  
It was the Aggie Spirit that helped instill a sense of service to her community, she said.

Selfless Service

It’s the little things that Katlene Lee ’13 remembers from the Grimes County Fire.

How it was her birthday and how the plan was to go to the Aggie football game, but then the uneasiness set in.

How from her vantage point from the third deck of Kyle Field, she could see smoke in the distance. How she wanted to leave, get back to her apartment where she could check emails. See if her department had contacted her.

How she’d been keeping up with the weather and fire conditions. She knew the high chance of fire, and she wanted to be ready to serve with her fellow volunteer firefighters in the Brazos County Precinct 3 Volunteer Fire Department.

Lee, a junior agricultural leadership and development major, doesn’t serve for the adrenaline. She selflessly serves because she knows it can make a bad situation a little bit better.

Lee and her mom moved from Tucson, Ariz., to Bellevue, Texas, when she was high school sophomore. One of the first things she did in her new home was start a Fire Explorers group through the Boy Scouts. Her dad passed away when Lee was just 9, but his service in the Tucson Volunteer Fire Department put a marker in Lee’s brain. This is what Lees do. They help. She eventually became both basic accredited and wildland certified, skills that came in handy in September.

“They called me up,” she said.

Part of her team had been there for about three days already. The smoke that could be seen from College Station was shocking, she said, “and that’s coming from a firefighter.” They were given the assignment to work as a strike team.

“We were there for 15 hours,” she said. She worked all through the night. She was part of a line of people tasked with walking through the forest and putting out flare-ups. She was part of a team tasked with protecting five houses, all of which remained standing. She was part of a group tasked with protecting the line of fire, and not letting it progress.

She was part of an Aggie-led effort to protect Texas and Texans. “I’m not unique,” she said. “There were a lot of people involved.” And, yet, her story is not about being an Aggie. It’s about living as one.

From the Aggies who sent in donations, to the Ags in county government and firefighting and medicine, Aggies at their core are dedicated to serving the greater good.

As of Nov. 14, The Texas Forest Service and local fire departments tallied its wildfire season response to 29,083 fires that burned 3,972,554 acres.

According to numbers released by the Texas Forest Service, the agency and local fire departments saved 38,554 homes and 12,984 other structures.

Visit tx.ag/2011fires to read more about the Texas fires of 2011 and how Texas A&M and Aggies responded:

• The Battalion published a story about an Aggie Ring found in the remains: tx.ag/TernusRing.
• Look through the Texas Forest Service’s presentation of the wildfire season: tx.ag/TxFS.
• Read about the different players in the A&M System’s response to the fires: tx.ag/System2011.
• You can support the Texas Forest Service, Texas Task Force 1 and the Veterinary Emergency Team through the Texas A&M Foundation: tx.ag/FireEndowment.

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