

The Battalion

Queen of Bonfire

By [Amanda Casanova](#)

Tuesday, November 17, 2009

When Miranda Adams earned the pot that marked her as a co-chairwoman for Aggie Bonfire, the 19-year-old from Santa Fe, Texas, slept with the maroon hard hat.

"Her freshman year, I remember her calling and saying she wanted to be involved with Bonfire," said her mother, Carolyn Adams.

Miranda was the first to attend A&M from the Adams' immediate family, following a line of older Aggie relatives.

"She decided early on that's where she wanted to go," Carolyn said. "She wouldn't even apply anywhere else."

A computer-generated design of Bonfire by Miranda posted on a tribute Web site shows flashes of red, orange and yellow sparking from tiers of brown. Maroon text near the drawing reads, "Fightin' Texas Aggie Bonfire."

Early morning Nov. 18, 1999, the stack of thousands of logs collapsed, killing 12 students and injuring at least 27 others. Bonfire was canceled and has not burned on campus since that day.

"She was very excited about Bonfire," Carolyn said. "We went her freshman year. We didn't get to see her because she was so tied up at it, but she called and told us how she was just so excited to be a part of it."

In 1998, Miranda was named as one of the co-chairs from Mosher Hall for Bonfire, fulfilling a dream for the biomedical science major.

Later, Miranda was dubbed the "Queen of Bonfire." Carolyn said the sophomore worked tirelessly on her pot in preparation for Aggie Bonfire 1999.

However, excitement turned to fear at the sound of a snap. Three hours after the collapse, the Adams received a phone call at 5:20 a.m.

"The Bonfire collapsed," Carolyn's sister told her, asking the couple if they had heard from Miranda.

The Adams had not.

After making the 133-mile drive from Santa Fe, the couple checked in at the Memorial Student Center before heading out to the fallen Bonfire.

"They were removing one of the last living victims," said Miranda's father, Kenny. "There were several students around who told us they remembered seeing Miranda."

With little information, the Adams went to the College Station Medical Center and then checked in at the St. Joseph Health System in Bryan.

"Nobody knew anything," Carolyn said.

At 9 p.m. Nov. 19, 1999, the Adams were given information about their daughter.

"They took us out to the Stack, and we were told she was in the Stack, but that they couldn't get to her yet," Carolyn said. "It was very quiet. I remember commenting to Kenny how quiet it was. I said, 'It's as quiet as a tomb out here,' and Kenny said, 'Carolyn, it is. It is a tomb for some of the kids.' Never dreaming that Miranda was one of them."

Later that night, Miranda's body was retrieved from beneath the heavy logs. She was one of the last to be pulled from the stack.

"It was an extremely long day," Kenny said. "It was hard for not only the families, but for the people that were having to deal with it: the campus, the administration and how they were going to have to deal with all these deaths at one time. No one wanted to be the person to tell you that your child was no longer with you."

Media vans lined the streets, rocking the nation with news of the collapse. Miranda's older brother, Mark, now 32, who was in the Marine Corps, heard of the collapse while stationed in Okinawa, Japan.

"We were trying to get word to him, and he was just trying to call home to see if his little sister was OK or not," Carolyn said. "We had to tell him that Miranda was gone."

Snapshots of Miranda taken from a disposable camera found days later in her car show her beaming beneath her maroon pot, her short light brown hair curling at her shoulders.

"Miranda's smile was something they all remember," Carolyn said. "She was a happy person." Emblazoned beneath her portrait at the Bonfire memorial is a quote from Miranda that was pulled from a scholarship application.

"Since the first day I set foot on the Texas A&M campus, I fell in love with it. The atmosphere is absolutely wonderful, and I couldn't imagine attending another school. I admit that the work is very hard, but it is all worth it to get the famous Aggie Senior Ring."

While Miranda never received the golden ring, her mother wore a Bonfire memorial charm in honor of her daughter.

In July 2006, former student and astronaut Mike Fossum took the charm with him on the space shuttle in memory of Miranda.

"The Aggie family has been very kind," Carolyn said. "We were overwhelmed by the love and support of the Aggie family that helped us during a very difficult time."

Since 2001, the Adams have had season football tickets. They also make several visits to the Bonfire memorial.

"We're still on a journey and coping with the loss of Miranda," Carolyn said. "God has been good to us, and so many people have prayed for us. We think about her every day and miss her terribly, but we also know she is in a place we can't even imagine."

Ten years later, Miranda's pot sits in a display case in their Santa Fe house. Ten years later, Miranda is remembered.

"The Aggie family told us they would never, ever forget our children and that has been true," Carolyn said. "We appreciate it and love the Aggie family dearly."

Muster 'softly calls' every Aggie

By [Amanda Casanova](#)

Monday, April 21, 2008

Reed Arena illuminates with the gentle glow of flickering candles. The Ross Volunteers march in crisp, white uniforms that prevail over the darkness. From the silence comes a time-honored Texas A&M tradition, a soft response to the call of the names of departed Aggies from the previous year.

"Here."

More than 100 Aggies will be honored at the "Roll Call for the Absent" in Reed Arena on Monday and almost 1,000 others will be honored at hometown Muster ceremonies worldwide.

"I think in college, we go so fast-paced all the time," said Andrea Abrams, a junior communication major and awareness sub-chairwoman for Muster Committee. "It's a couple hours to sit back and reflect on how grateful we are to have a University that cares so much about us to individually call our names."

Thomas Conner, senior industrial distribution major and chairman of Muster Committee, said Muster is a momentous event for any Aggie.

"Muster is a day to celebrate those lives and get back together with other Aggies and remember why it's important to be an Aggie," he said.

Muster dates back to the 1800s when Aggies came together annually to reminisce. The annual gathering soon grew to coincide with Texas Independence on San Jacinto Day, April 21.

Campus Muster, as it is known today, was formed by E. E. McQuillen, class of 1920, who served as the executive secretary of The Association of Former Students and the first campus Muster speaker.

"At a school that's rooted in tradition and high values, respect is one of the greatest values that A&M upholds," Abrams said. "I think Muster is what makes the Aggie family so strong. The fact that I'm going to answer 'here' for someone who went to my school 60 years ago says a lot."

Abrams said Muster is a way for the sometimes overwhelming campus to embrace every student.

"You're not just a number at this huge University. You're an Aggie. You're part of this family," she said. "It's one of the most powerful traditions. It affects every single person that walks across campus at Texas A&M."

Operated by 29 students, Muster preparation takes almost a year to organize. Because of the size of Muster and the limited hands behind the scenes, Conner said that every committee member is essential to the success of Muster.

"Each individual has his or her job," he said. "If he or she did not do her job, then campus Muster would not happen."

Hoping for a packed arena Monday night, Abrams said she is eager to take part in her favorite A&M tradition.

"April is always such a special time," she said. "You see things starting to come together. You see the campus getting excited. You hear your friends talking. I'm excited to see the campus get involved and for not just the 29 of us to be excited all year around."

Abrams said that Muster emphasizes both Aggie spirit and core values.

"I love football games. I love the spirit there," she said. "But the focus is on the football and the players and not the family side of A&M, which is important to this school."

With the lighting of candles marking the remembrance of fallen Aggies, Abrams said there is hope for some resolution.

"I was just in awe of the healing that it does," she said. "A lot of families don't know what Muster is. I think so many families experience a great amount of closure when all of these students come out and honor their kid."

Conner said he hopes those who have never been to Muster will attend. He said he remembers his first time sitting in a darkened Reed Arena as especially moving.

"I'm a little jealous of their first experience," he said. "It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was the first time I felt connected to the Texas A&M family. The first time is special. I encourage everyone to go and soak it all in."

Abrams said that Muster is a timeless tradition at Aggieland that "softly calls" to every Aggie.

"It's the only tradition where everyone plays a part," she said. "Not everyone has to attend Silver Taps or go out for Big Event, but every single person that goes through A&M will someday have their name called at a Muster."

Hooting, hollering and raising hell

By [Amanda Casanova](#)

Tuesday, February 19, 2008

Clad in a hunter green T-shirt and sporting a cowboy hat, Kevin Fowler leans back lazily in his seat a few hours before he is set to take the stage at the Texas Hall of Fame. Fowler is no stranger to Aggieland, usually making a tour stop here three to four times a year.

"Aggies are rowdy," Fowler said. "I love it. They come out just ready to roar and have a good time. These Aggies like drinking cold beer, hooting and hollering and raising hell."

Fowler's band plays about 165 shows a year, shuttling around in his home state of Texas and occasionally Oklahoma.

"Everything in my camp revolves around the live show," he said. "That's what it's about for us. It's not about radio or videos. It's about the live interaction with the audience."

With the crowd roaring and bottles raised high, Fowler said he feeds off the audience, achieving success with every show.

"Everything in my career is just a means to the end, which is the show - those 90 minutes," Fowler said. "I like making the record, but I love playing live."

Born in Amarillo, Fowler made waves on the Texas country music scene with his song, "Long Line of Losers." The track earned status as the fastest rising song in the Texas market and was recently covered by Montgomery Gentry.

"The most rewarding thing for me is writing a song and seeing that song title written on a bar napkin or Post-It on the dashboard of my truck, to seeing the crowd sing along with it at a show," Fowler said.

Blending traditional country sound with rock 'n' roll, Fowler managed to create a steady fan following.

"It's country music with a bad attitude," he said. "It's pick-up driving and beer drinking. I don't write songs about saving the world or politics. We leave that to other people. My songs are about having a good time. It's about entertainment."

Fowler's advice to young musicians trying to rocket to success is simple.

"I always heard stories about the music business," he said. "If it's in your blood, then it's in your blood. You either love it or you hate it."

Even Fowler admitted the labor involved in an industry that was usually pegged as bright lights and limitless lifestyles is arduous.

"If I'd have known how hard it was, I would've just gotten a real job," he said.

Musical influences explain Fowler's wide-ranged sound.

"I listen to everything from Metallica to George Strait," Fowler said. "I love rock, but I grew up on country. I'm one of those guys who are walking musical contradictions."

Fowler attended West Texas A&M in Canyon, studying business and accounting. After playing bars and gaining credibility, he moved to Austin to pursue a music career.

His single, "The Best Mistake I Ever Made," was also his first single that has been released nationally. The song, co-written with Bobby Pounds, who also worked with Fowler on the song, "Don't Touch My Willie," was inspired by his then 3-year-old daughter.

She interrupted Fowler and Pounds as they tried to write, or as Fowler describe, "helping" the pair. Finally, Fowler looked at her and said, "That's the best mistake I ever made."

"I think the autobiographical songs are the easiest ones to write as opposed to story songs. I think it's the best song I've ever written."

The Texas country music market has embraced Fowler's sound, earning him the headlining slot at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in March.

"We've been working really hard," he said. "There are several milestones for a Texas artist. First, you want to play at Gruene Hall, then you want to sell out Billy Bob's and the next logical step is the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo."

Fowler said he is excited to be playing in the bustling city, knowing it could be a springboard for success.

"It's huge for Texas music," Fowler said. "They're stepping out and taking a risk on a Texas artist. If we go out there and have a great show, then maybe next year it'll be Randy Rogers or Roger Creager headlining."

Between tour stops, Fowler was ironing out the details in a new hunting and fishing TV show he hopes to air within the next year. The program will feature country music.

"I'm starting to write for the next record," he said. "It's a vicious cycle - write, record, tour. As soon as we start touring hard, it's time to write another."

While the demands of a musician may sometimes be difficult, Fowler continues to look toward the future while remembering his roots.

"We're hoping to have some success out of the state," he said. "At the same time, though, Texas is our home."

Class of 1935 graduate remembers his time in Aggieland and speaks about his appreciation for the Aggie Band

By [Amanda Casanova](#)

Friday, October 12, 2007

Camera flashes ripple across Kyle Field, a bellowing voice cries "Hullabaloo," and the crowd's noise resonates through the stadium. As the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band steps out, the clamor becomes muted and the familiar start to the "The Aggie War Hymn" marks the beginning of the halftime show. For Mike Dillingham, Class of 1935, there is a surge of pride when witnessing what cannot be contained into words.

"I don't know how the words 'Aggie spirit' ever developed," the 95-year-old said. "I don't know when it got that title or how it came about. I just know we all had it, and it was here and alive when I was here."

Dillingham graduated high school at 16 and attended Texas Christian University in his hometown of Fort Worth for one year before becoming part of the Aggie Class of 1935.

Dillingham said College Station in the early 1930s did not feature a bustling Northgate area, live bands or the student body size now associated with Texas A&M's home.

The University housed and educated an estimated 2,500 students, all members of the Corps of Cadets, during Dillingham's collegiate years. He studied petroleum engineering and soon found himself immersed in the atmosphere of A&M.

"It all comes under the heading of spirit," he said. "You just get this feeling. You just acquire it. You're part of something big when you're part of A&M."

Campus life consisted of hot meals in Sbisa and a run by a "Mr. Duncan," that would later become the "Duncan" in Duncan Dining Center. Future A&M President Earl Rudder was then a senior and yell practices were held at the steps of the YMCA Building. Even the halftime show at football games had an interesting twist.

"For a football game then, the athletic ticket was virtually nothing," Dillingham said. "At the half, the kids all came out of the stands and we formed the '[block] T.' When it was over, we would run back up into the stadium."

The unification of the student body stems back to Dillingham's days as a student. However, he sees Aggie pride reflected the strongest in the straightened lines of khaki that take shape at the north end of Kyle Field minutes before the half. The crowd "oohs" and "ahhs," a whistle sounds, and the culmination of the Aggie Band's work can finally receive an echoing applause from 86,000 wide-eyed fans like Dillingham.

"I see their dedication. That's my love, and I love to award them for their work and the dedication that they have," Dillingham said. "Everybody loves the Aggie Band. Everyone watches them. When the Aggie Band starts on the field, we all stand up."

According to the band's website, the Aggie Band boasts the title of "largest military marching band in the United States." With roughly 350 cadets, the band logs in an estimated 10 to 15 hours of practice time weekly.

"When you see pictures of Kyle Field, you usually see the band too," said Michael Valdez, a senior marketing major and head drum major of the Aggie Band. "The Aggie Band is not the easiest, but it is definitely the best."

Dillingham has made several financial contributions to boost Corp involvement. Hoping to incite a continuing trend of tradition and excellence within the band, Dillingham believes in the exponential effect of giving.

"A scholarship goes on forever," he said. "We give the money to the foundation. They invest that money. Then the investment out of it provides money for scholarship. Then a guy gets a scholarship, has it for three or four years, and then another guy comes along and gets one."

Now living in Alice, Texas, with his wife, Dillingham served as a battery commander his senior year at A&M and, although he never carried an instrument or knew the opening notes to "The Aggie War Hymn," the Aggie Band has become his passion and a strong incentive to return to Kyle Field.

"We must be doing something right for someone to feel like that and not have even been in the band," Valdez said. "It means there is a connection, and words cannot express our gratitude and thanks."

But Dillingham credited A&M for his actions.

"The Aggie Spirit is what drives me to do it," he said. "I see what they do and I know how hard they work and that's why I give my money. They're dedicated."

Valdez echoed Dillingham's desire to reward current Aggies and ultimately show the significance of giving back.

"I've always been a firm believer in giving back," he said. "If you believe in something and its greatness, then prolonging that greatness with financial assistance shows that importance."

Part of a tradition of honor and precision, the Aggie Band finds encouragement in the three decks of shifting bodies and maroon shirts.

"I believe we are at the pinnacle of it all," Valdez said. "We're ambassadors. We represent A&M, but when you look up at the 12th Man and see a cloud of white from the towels, it just makes you want to be that much more of an Aggie."

Dillingham has made his life's work about reflecting his A&M days. His Aggie Ring, sides smoothed from weathering, rolled slightly to the side as Dillingham cited the reasoning behind his dedication.

"You're a part of something big," he said. "And why not participate? It's here for you. Why come here, graduate and take off? Stay in contact with A&M. You need them and they need you. I can't see not participating with A&M. I think that's one of the ways A&M survives. It's the Aggie Spirit."