A Note from the Editor

I’ve written many reflections about the fire that devastated the Main building on May 6, 2008. I’ve written in my journal about it. At public readings and in interviews, I’ve shared the most personal of stories and feelings about the disquieting time in the days following the disaster.

What I haven’t written nearly enough about are the heroes. I don’t use that term lightly. The word gets bandied about today as if being heroic were as easy as getting out of bed and going to work. For most of us, that’s not heroic. But on this campus on May 6, 2008 and on the days that followed, heroes emerged.

It would be careless to attempt to name them all—every one of the men and women who worked tirelessly and served selflessly for the sake of others as a consequence of the devastating fire. I wish I could. My list is long and still growing even all these months since the fire.

The objective for this special fire issue of Carriers of the Mission was to encourage these stories from people who witnessed heroism or who observed someone stepping up to help in ways selfless and generous. But those witnesses are mostly silent, preferring perhaps to continue to share those stories in other contexts. I suppose we can find solace in knowing that the heroes are recognized and thanked, if not by written tributes, then perhaps in silent prayers of gratitude.

I reacted to the fire the way I have come to discover, many of us did. I watched in horror and disbelief the televised broadcast of the famous fire. I talked to colleagues and family on the phone. I was in a kind of shock that gave way to wild tears and a riotous sorrow that I could not easily contain. I slept not at all that evening. This is how I’ve spent nights when loved ones have passed away—first wildly emotional, then quiet, numb, exhausted.

I was, of course, thrilled to learn that no one perished. But there was nothing to take away the sorrow of driving us to campus the following morning to see the ravages of the flames and water on our beloved Main building.

Three days after the fire, my colleagues and I sat in a Worden School classroom for a grief-counseling session coordinated by the psychology department. A bounteous bowl of fruit was passed around as were the suddenly ubiquitous bottles of drinking water. Early May is oppressively humid and hot in San Antonio. My colleagues and I were without offices, without a place to be. We spent a lot of time walking around in the heat. The generous rations of food and water on this campus were two things I don’t think I’ll ever forget.
As the meeting got started, we received word that we would be allowed to enter Main building for any essential items. That meant items essential to administering final exams and submitting grades for the spring term. With my Main colleagues I reluctantly left the grief counseling meeting thinking that now more than ever I needed the help of these therapists.

As we entered through the doors in the breezeway between Chapel Auditorium and Main, we were overcome by an assault on our senses and emotions. The smell of smoke and a clammy, humid must overwhelmed us. We could not hear each other above the deafening whir of fans and vacuums in the hot, steamy hallway.

And it was dark. It was very dark.

Of course, the place was without electricity with only generators to power up the fans. There were small bulbs here and there down the long corridor to light the way, but it was mostly a shadowy darkness that I had never seen in Main building in almost 14 years of working there.

I balanced the strange foreignness of the borrowed hard hat we were all required to wear in the building and tearfully braced myself for the climb up the staircase to my office on the second floor.

I entered the narrow hallway that had been my soft place to land for so many years. In my office in Main 220, I saw a crush of furniture from other offices. Frames were off the wall, and family photos and books were strewn about. The ceiling tiles had been removed, and exposed wires of varying lengths hung like creepy crepe streamers. The carpeting had been pulled up to reveal worn, scraped and scratched hardwoods. Many of the books on my shelves were already moldy. I opened up file drawers to find water had accumulated there and papers and files—the documentation of 14 years of work at OLLU—were a pulpy mash. I stood there stunned, taking in this apocalyptic vision. I heard the officer who had escorted us into the building yelling out to us that we had to hurry. “Essential items only,” she reminded us sympathetically.

I wanted to grab the whole room in my arms and walk to safety. But I could only take what I could carry.

One of the photos on the floor was one of my twin brother and me in the first grade. I'd brought the photo—the symbol of innocent, good times—into the office years before. My brother, a Navy Commander, was in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. He lost his office, too. He also lost many comrades, colleagues and friends in that interminable firefight. The photo of the two of us is even more significant to me now: no one was taken from us in OLLU's fire.
I heard the officer call out again. I grabbed a figurine of the Virgen de Guadalupe. It had been a gift from my sister.

I spied my gradebook next to a pile of drenched student portfolios. I picked those up gently, reading my students’ names silently to myself and realizing that their efforts over the long spring term were represented by these folders full of essays. I held them to my chest and surveyed the room.

Pictures of my daughter stared back at me behind shattered glass and broken frames. In one photo, she looks Christmas-morning-happy, although somewhat stunned, too, holding up a princess gown in front of her. The expression is at once incongruous and somehow fitting in this context.

Next my gaze fell on my diplomas stacked now on a small desk. They seemed dry and, miraculously, undamaged. For a moment I looked at them closely—something I hadn’t done in years. Ironically, at this moment they were “unessential” items in this important mission to find only what we needed to complete the semester. I left them behind with a silent prayer that I might see them again.

Before exiting the hall, I ran into Professor Kay O’Donnell’s office. At this very moment Kay was across campus in a makeshift, temporary office shepherding her LaFe staff in their work to produce a special “Fire Issue” of the school newspaper.

I made many phone calls on May 6. Kay, however, was the first person to call me just to make sure I was OK. She’d expressed to me then that the only thing she wanted from her office besides her essential school items was a photo of her mother. I spied the photo on Kay’s desk and grabbed it. One person’s nonessential item is another woman’s most treasured possession.

My colleagues and I emerged outside the English hall. The officer hurriedly escorted us down the dark hallway. The drone of the fans was now strangely comforting. My eyes adjusted to the darkness as we purposefully carried our things—essential and priceless—out into the unwearyed, dependable sun.

We were allowed to return to our offices to collect other items over the next several days. Some parts of the hallway were so dark. I felt like a blind person with arms outstretched feeling my way to my office, the darkness perhaps symbolic of the darkest time we’ve spent together at our beloved school.
I later had recurring nightmares like that: a dark maze, a labyrinthine classroom full of students waiting for me to come find the switch on the wall so we could all see. The dreams, I suppose, were a consequence of some kind of post-traumatic stress after seeing the horror of our building in flames.

But fire is light.

When I consider that now, I recall one of my favorite lines from the classic film The Miracle Worker. It is a story about Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher. In the film, the beautiful Anne Bancroft tells a very young Patty Duke that we are only here on earth for a “wink.” She says that the light we bring to earth comes in the form of words. Annie Sullivan tells her young, silent charge, “You can see years back in the light of words... So not a soul is in darkness or done with even in the grave.”

Thanks to the valiant efforts of so many, our school was saved from further damage and it will be rebuilt. Thanks to so many we have been able to return to our wonderful purpose and blessed work. For now, we have to feel our way through the darkness a bit, using “the light of words.”

Here, follow now the stories and poems of staff, student and faculty, alumna, and even an acclaimed author many of our students first met in Hispanic American Literature class in Main. Here are the words of the Lake Community who have reflected on the fire and the days following, or on other personal tragedies they’ve struggled through and emerged from in glorious light. They document their experiences for us and illuminate the way.

—Yvette Benavides

Carriers of the Mission
Maintaining Faith

La Llamada

OLLU
OUR LADY OF THE LAKE UNIVERSITY
2008