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FIRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO LIBRARY

Linda K. Lewis and Frances C. Wilkinson

Just before 11 p.m. on Sunday, April 30, 2006 UNM's Zimmerman Library was on fire. Library staff quickly evacuated the students preparing for finals. The fire department arrived and put out the fire which was confined to the basement periodicals area. The cause of the fire is still officially under investigation. Thankfully, no one was hurt, and the damage was limited to the periodicals area; our books, special collections, and archives were not damaged.

The Library's Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Plan guided our emergency response. Managers used the Plan's phone tree to inform Zimmerman employees where to report. The DRAT (Disaster Response Assistance Team) met Monday morning at 8 in our Centennial Science and Engineering Library to deal with the crisis. Our first priority was to re-establish services to our customers. We set-up minimal reference and information services in the Student Union Building and arranged for extended hours at the Union for students to study. We also extended hours at two of our branch library locations and relocated interlibrary loan and reserve services. We staffed information tables near both entrances to Zimmerman. In addition, we created a webpage with information about the fire and our recovery, including a FAQ sheet. As soon as we regained partial access to Zimmerman Library, we developed a paging system to retrieve books. Our staff was relocated to our other campus libraries. To stay in communication with each other, we borrowed cell phones for those who needed them. We also borrowed laptop computers from various campus and state organizations for our displaced staff.

Our electronic resources remained available because our LIBROS server was located at our campus computing service. Due to our substantial collection of electronic journals and our expedited interlibrary loan service, students were able to complete their end of semester assignments.

While the fire had been confined to part of the basement, it was very intense. Some materials were burned completely; there was some water damage, and the smell of smoke and soot spread through the building. The odor of smoke could be detected outside the building for days. The burned materials were taken out through a basement skylight. After the ashes were removed, the entire building, excluding the burned-out basement—every shelf, every book, every wall—was cleaned.

All the surviving journals and microforms in the basement were packed in 18-wheel trucks and taken to an out-of-state disaster recovery company for cleaning. We estimate that we lost at least 30,000 volumes of journals in American history, Latin American studies, ethnic studies, Southwestern studies, anthropology, social sciences and humanities.

We reopened part of the Zimmerman first floor on June 25, providing reference and circulation services, access to the Center for Southwest Research, and study space in our

historic West Wing. Starbucks, located in our lobby, also reopened. Our paging service continued until July 17 when our second and third floors reopened to the public.

Our reference area located on the first floor directly above the basement fire sustained significant smoke damage and will require renovation. We are taking this opportunity to remodel the area to provide additional public space. We will merge our general reference and our government information reference services, provide more computers, offer more collaborative study space to our customers, and install a fire suppression system. Completion of the project is expected in late November.

Reconstruction of the extensively damaged basement will take considerably longer. Lighting and smoke detectors were melted, the flooring and walls were destroyed, and even the shelving warped and collapsed. The basement has now been cleared completely down to the cement. It will be totally rebuilt. The estimated date for reopening the basement is late spring to summer 2007.

We continuously update our web page with information about the fire, see <http://elibrary.unm.edu/ziminfo.php>. We have also posted a preliminary list of the lost titles on that website. We will work closely with the campus to identify materials that are priorities for immediate replacement. We are tracking offers of donations, but we have very limited storage space and are therefore unable to accept physical donations yet unless the circumstances are exceptional.

While we hope that other New Mexico libraries will never have to go through a disaster; however, some of you may. We have learned some lessons that might help others if they face disasters:

- Have a disaster plan. All managers must have copies at home and at work. If you have an intranet, put a copy there.
- Know who to call in your organization's administration, your library staff, your police and fire departments, your physical maintenance people and your insurance companies.
- Have someone able to deal with the media.
- Use technology to keep in touch: cell phones, email, instant messaging.
- Communicate continuously, with everyone. Have staff meetings in addition to email. Meetings are especially crucial when people are scattered and working in different locations.
- Know that some decisions will have to be made incredibly quickly. Do the best you can, and keep moving forward.
- Know that some things will seem to take forever. While some things do take a long time, such as investigations of what caused the disaster, others just seem to take longer because it is a crisis situation.
- Accept the emotional aftershocks. Some people will go through many of the seven stages of grief (shock, denial, bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, acceptance). Others may have some post-traumatic stress reactions. Respect that, and do not dismiss it. Some people will be helped by informational meetings. We used pizza and ice cream parties as an opportunity for staff scattered in several

buildings to come together. Depending upon the situation, counseling referral services may be helpful.

Zimmerman's fire was tragic, and it will take a long time to rebuild some of the collections that were lost. We will rebuild the physical library into an even better facility. While it is a cliché, we have become stronger through this disaster and view it as an opportunity for improvement. We are deeply grateful for all the support we have received from our campus, our colleagues throughout New Mexico and nationally. We know that we could not rebuild without that support.