THE
ZIMMERMAN FIRE:
(re)collections
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“… this was totally out of anybody’s control. Out of our control and everything was just ripped apart.”

Kathleen Keating
Reference Coordinator, UL

April 30, 2006 10:51 p.m.
Alarms sound

Police and fire departments notified of a fire in UNM’s

Russ Cole
Nighttime Shelving Supervisor, Circulation, Zimmerman Library, University Libraries

I’ve been trying to reconstruct it; it all happened really fast. The alarm went off and Lowell, the counter supervisor, and I started sending people simultaneously to different floors. Lea was studying and she offered to help and we were pretty sure fairly quickly that we had somebody everywhere that people should be. That was maybe one or two minutes and then I went to the panel by the back door to see where the alarm was and opened the box and right then a campus police officer came in, very quickly, and so I showed him the northeast corner, basement. And he said, “Okay, I’ll go down.” Then people started coming back from various areas, but he was the first one. He came back up immediately and said, “There’s a flames down there.” And I thought, “Oh, my god.” I didn’t know exactly what he meant. When he said that we still had people out on the floors, then it was trying to keep track. I remember that I wasn’t real confident that the person we’d sent to the 2nd floor knew enough about it, even the corners of that floor, so I grabbed someone else and said, “You go to the 2nd floor, too.” And it turned out he did find some people in one of the corners that the other person missed.

It felt to me like all that took place in about five minutes, but it may have been a little longer and then I remember the officer said, “Okay you can evacuate now.” And I thought he meant you can evacuate all the people and I told him, “I think we’re as clear as we can be now.” And he said, “No, YOU!” So I had to go out.

Then we were out in the parking lot and more police cars and the fire trucks started coming pretty quickly. There was some confusion about how to get the hoses in. They were trying to decide which door to go in. I finally just ran out there to where the fire people were and said, “I’ve got a master key. What do you need?” And they said, “How do you get to the northeast corner of the building?” So I took them to the one stairway that comes up over there and opened that for them and they went down and not long after they had to smash out the

Zimmerman Library
State Fire Marshal’s Office controls Zimmerman operations and is provided space in library
Disaster Response initiated and coordinated by University Library (UL) personnel
skylights to get the hoses in. At least I think so; they wouldn’t let us get close again. That door winds through all these other rooms and is very indirect, so it would be pretty hard to get hoses through, so finally they took them through the skylight. They were in there pretty quick and then they just didn’t come out. More and more firemen came and the smoke was just billowing. They kept us all back. There were people who walked up from who knows where. There was one guy I could see the smoke pouring out from the building and he’s telling me, “But I really need to return this book.” And I said, “Well, wait ‘til tomorrow, okay?”

Once we were pretty sure it was in the hands of the campus police and the fire people, my first concern was how to get a hold of somebody. So, because I didn’t have a cell phone, I was walking around asking to borrow one. I had to get Ed’s number, so I called my home and told Neil’s sister to look up his number and I called him pretty quickly but he told me that Fran had already talked to him and he was getting ready to come. I didn’t call her, but someone else must have really quickly. And so then I knew Ed was coming and I couldn’t think of anything else I could really do, but at that point we still thought we were going to go back in and get our stuff and close the library. We didn’t realize how big it was at all. Smoke wasn’t really billowing yet. It was about 11:10 p.m. We didn’t realize it would be months before we’d get back in. I’d been eating fried chicken at my desk and thought it would still be good when I got back to it. It didn’t seem very long at all before Fran came up. She said, “I just want you to know I’m here.” That felt very good because I knew at some point we’d be talking to people about what had happened, and that’s fine, but I knew that I didn’t know everything I should know about the building structure and things like that. So that was really nice, when she was there. And then, I don’t know how long after that—ah hour or so!—they put crime scene tape up. I remember when Ed got there and we were asking them if we could go in at some point. One of the answers was, “If you go in there you’ll be entering a crime scene and you’ll be arrested,” or something like that. Pretty firm. And then somebody came up and asked us about the students. I couldn’t think of anything else I could really do, but at that point we still thought we were going to go back in and get our stuff and close the library. We didn’t realize how big it was at all.

I walked around the west side of Zimmerman to the front and went by Social Sciences being available to look at drawings if they had any questions about the library. It was about 11:30 because I was already in bed and asleep at the time. It was really upsetting seeing smoke coming out of the skylights and looking into the West Wing and seeing the reading rooms inundated with smoke, just full of smoke. That gave me a sinking feeling, like this wasn’t just some small trash can fire. Not only that, just driving into the area, you couldn’t get close. There were fire trucks all the way around the turn-around between University House and Dane Smith and through that whole area. So that image said, “Oh, no, this is not good at all.” Plus the fact that we were not allowed to go into the building because there was smoke in there. At that point, we just thought it was the whole building; we were horrified. We just didn’t know anything, but thought, “My god, this is huge.”

There was a chimney or something, and we were just horrified to see that. It looked like it was coming out of the top of the tower. Smoke was billowing out of the skylights, but it looked like it was coming from just about everywhere. I told the campus police in the Willard Room and there was smoke in there. At that point, we just thought it was the whole building; we were horrified. We just didn’t know anything, but thought, “My god, this is huge.”

Fran Wilkinson
Interim Dean, University Libraries
Nancy Dennis
Assistant Dean, University Libraries

I live close to UNM and I remember that night, as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard sirens at 10:30/11-ish. I remember thinking, “Oh dear, somebody is having a bad day.” Little did I know. So, it was probably about 1:30 a.m. when I was awakened by a phone call. You know this is not going to be good news. It was Fran—very business like—“Nancy, this is Fran. There’s been a fire at Zimmerman. I need you to start the phone tree.” And then we were talking about who else needed to be notified and who’d been called. Camila [Camila Alire, Dean, University Libraries] was out of town, but would return from D.C. in the morning. And we discussed some more of the logistics. I asked, “Should I come down there?” She said, “No, just make sure the phone tree starts probably around 5-ish in the morning. You don’t want to wake people up at 2 o’clock to say don’t come to work. But it’s going to be on the news and you need to start catching people to tell them not to come to work at Zimmerman. Tell them, “Yes, there has been a fire. Stay home until you hear otherwise from us, that sort of thing.”

Probably around 5:00 a.m. I started calling people at the top of the list—the managers, department heads, directors, that sort. Some of them had already heard. In fact some people I talked to said, “Yeah, I just heard it on the radio.” I was waking people up which is awkward, telling them, “Well, there’s been a little bit of a fire; don’t come to work.” You know, it was being the bearer of bad news but still not knowing how bad. We did not know the extent of the damage at that point or how long we were going to be closed.

So that was my first experience, clicking into the mode of getting my list, trying to gather my phone numbers and focusing on what to do and then, of course, being here first thing in the morning.

Well, there’s been a little bit of a fire.

Russ Cole
Nighttime Shelving Supervisor, Zimmerman Library

One thing that strikes me when I think back on that night is the sense of growing magnitude. In the moment when the alarm went off, it was pretty routine; we were basically concerned with what we always do: just get people out as best we can. Then as the night went on, standing out in the parking lot watching the smoke billow out for hours and hours, just realizing how enormous it was going to be. I remember when my son Neil was about to be born I was worried that when it came time to make that rush to the hospital I would freeze up. I even asked my doctor about that, “But what if I just fold?” When the time came, it was rushed, but there was no problem like that. With the night of the fire, not knowing until we almost had the place cleared out that it was a real fire played a big part in staying calm.

“Throughout the night the awareness of how bad it was just grew and grew and grew.”

RUSS COLE
Zimmerman Library

Immediately after the fire, while Zimmerman Library was closed for emergency recovery, 105 (or 75%) of a total of 140 UL employees were displaced.
Nancy Dennis, e-mail, April 16, 2007

Student Union Bldg (SUB) for all other subjects
May 2
Essentials for displaced staff and library patrons retrieved from Zimmerman— with or without permission
Reference services begin at SUB