

University seeks support, prayers following devastating fire

SAN ANTONIO – The skyline of San Antonio was changed the night of May 6 as a massive fire gutted the historic Main Building at Our Lady of the Lake University, destroying some of the structure's unique silver spires and severely damaging other majestic steeples that adorned the top of the more than century-old facility.

Built in 1895, the imposing Gothic-style structure was designed by renowned architect James Wahrenberger and was a crown jewel in the impoverished west side neighborhood that is home to the coeducational liberal arts institution. More than 2,800 students are enrolled in the university, which was founded in 1895 by the Congregation of Divine Providence, which has a convent and a convalescent home located on the campus.

The four-alarm blaze illuminated the evening sky and was fought by 120 firefighters and close to three dozen firetrucks from the San Antonio Fire Department, more than half the city's resources.

With flames still visible on the roof of the Main Building, university President Tessa Martinez Pollack and San Antonio Archbishop Jose H. Gomez spoke to a crowd of hundreds of students on the library steps just across the street from the fire, with the school leader saying, "We were very blessed not to have any injuries of any kind."

A small number of students were in classes in the building when the fire alarm went off around 7:30 p.m., and they quickly evacuated the facility. Administrative offices, including the president's work space, are located on the first and fourth floors of the structure, with classrooms and faculty offices on the second and third floors.

A cafeteria sits behind the tan brick building, with the Theresian Hall dormitory located above the cafeteria. Following the blaze, 35 residents of Theresian Hall were relocated to other dorms on campus, along with 83 students from Providence Hall. That building was not damaged, and school officials say the move is only a

temporary, precautionary measure.

The San Antonio Fire Department's Arson Investigation Unit is now conducting an investigation into the cause of the fire. On May 5, a written bomb threat forced the evacuation of the campus for several hours, prompting some speculation among students that the blaze was intentionally set. However, fire department and police officials are currently discounting the connection between the two incidents, as it appears the blaze began in the attic of the Main Building.

The university maintains building insurance and business interruption insurance, and adjusters are assessing potential damage estimates.

The day following the tragedy, a prayer service of thanksgiving was held at the University Wellness and Athletic Center for students, faculty and staff. Although classes had been canceled for the day, the gym was filled to capacity with several hundred people.

Franciscan Father David Gutierrez, campus chaplain, began the service by saying, "We give thanks that no lives were lost, and we give thanks to those praying for this community. We give thanks that we are united, expressing our concern and embracing each other."

Gloria Urrabazo, vice president for mission, echoed those remarks. "We thank God for the miracle that happened last night; that no lives were lost," she said. "We are a community of faith and perseverance. We are loved. We are blessed."

Dr. Pollack, the university president, gave an emotional address to the audience, at times eliciting tears and cheers as she discussed the enormous outpouring of support from the community "in this complicated time."

"I stand here with profound and humble gratitude for many. I give thanks to our provident God that no one was injured in the most significant tragedy in the history of our university," she said. "I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to our firefighters. They put up a tremendous struggle to fight a stubborn fire."

Following that comment, the crowd rose to its feet in a sustained standing ovation for personnel from the San Antonio Fire Department, some of whom were in

attendance.

“From smoke to flames to inferno to the collapse of the spire, we have experienced an enormous loss, and the grief is palpable,” Dr. Pollack said. “The Main Building has been severely damaged, but we will restore Our Lady of the Lake University to its grandeur. I will ask for commitments from friends old and new for Our Lady of the Lake.”

Dan Yoxall, university vice president of marketing and communications, said final examinations will still be held next week, and that graduation liturgies and commencement will be held next week as scheduled. “The university has been headed in a positive direction and we will not let this tragedy impede our momentum. We are making plans for the upcoming semesters,” he said.