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FIRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

By 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. 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. We staffed information tables near both entrances to Zimmerman. In addition, we created a webpage with information about the fire and our recovery. 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 arranged for cell phones. We also borrowed laptop computers from various campus and state organizations for our displaced staff.

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. 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 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 July 26, 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 our second and third floors reopened to the public a few weeks later.

Our reference area located directly above the basement fire area sustained significant smoke damage. We are taking this opportunity to remodel the area to provide additional public space, more computers, more collaborative study spaces, and 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. The estimated date for reopening the basement is summer 2007.

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.