



Logan Evans/*The Collegian*

Firefighters scale a 150-foot ladder to spray the burning Advanced Foam Recycling plant with water.

# Alumni fight giant factory fire

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**LOGAN EVANS**

*campus editor/photographer*

A flowering plume of smoke bruised the sky over Fort Worth a deep black, spilling out from what had once been Advanced Foam Recycling in Richland Hills. Hundreds of emergency responders and onlookers surrounded the caved-in facility as it burned — the result of an industrial fire.

“I’ve been in the fire ser-

vice for 30 years, and this was the biggest fire I’ve ever fought,” Richland Hills fire chief and TCC graduate Russell Shelly said.

Just before the accident, the morning of Feb. 25 was business as usual for nearly 100 employees who worked in the building to recycle old foam into stuffing for pillows, plush animals and dog beds — things of comfort.

By the afternoon, that building was a jagged wreckage the size of a city block.

According to several employee accounts, the fire started around noon when a factory grinder used to shred the foam malfunctioned. Reports from as far as Denton — over 30 miles from the site — described a massive cloud of smoke pulsing in the distance.

A Fort Worth fire engine company was the first on the scene. They were soon joined by multiple departments from the

**See *Fire*, page 5**

greater Fort Worth area, all of which played a part.

“Our guys were on I-20 finishing a car accident and turned around to see this huge column of smoke,” Shelly said. “They immediately responded.”

Within minutes, the scene burst with activity. The growl of the flames and the wail of emergency vehicles clashed in a wall of sound. Smoke spun over streams of water as the wind shifted, at one point blowing back onto a gathering crowd of onlookers.

Some Tarrant County residents saw the smoke from over a dozen miles away and thought it was coming from just outside their neighborhoods — a testament to the size of the inferno.

Fort Worth resident Dmtrio Valsadua was driving down a nearby highway when his truck was flushed overhead with smoke. At first, he thought it was storming. Fearing the smoke may be the result of a chemical accident, he decided to drive to the scene and learn more.

“My wife was scared. She didn’t want me to go,” Valsadua said as he studied the fire from his open driver side door. “Sometimes, people die.”

Despite the magnitude of the fire and the number of people involved, only three minor injuries were reported, believed to be employees hurt while evacuating.



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## Over 125 emergency personnel fought the fire as it burned from noon Feb. 25 to evening the next day for a total of 29 hours.

Founded in 1997, Advanced Foam Recycling is one of the country’s largest scrap foam supplies. Because of the high flammability of the foam and the sheer amount of it stored in the warehouse — what Shelly said totaled 100,000 pounds — the building burned long into the night. The metal roof collapsed early on, making it difficult for responders to subdue the fire.

Benbrook firefighter Valarie Willis — another TCC graduate — arrived with her company early the

following morning as the building was still smoldering. Heavy rain had fallen through the previous night, but because of how the roof fell, hardly any of it had reached the burning foam.

“I ended up going to the tip of the ladder to get a better view of it so we could find the right spots,” she said.

Willis and her company sprayed hot spots for over five hours. It wasn’t until 5:30 that evening — 29 hours into the fire —

that responders cleared the scene.

For the next two days, drivers on the nearby highway reported small flames in the wreckage as hot foam reignited beneath the collapsed roof. Shelly’s department dispatched to the site several times to subdue the flare-ups.

Until the building owners settle with their insurance company and demolish the wreckage, this may continue to happen, Shelly said.

Shelly graduated from TCC Fire Training Academy in 1995 and

worked as a firefighter in Azle, Colleyville and Southlake before joining the Richland Hills Fire Department in 2014.

To know that the biggest fire of his long career was fought without a single death or major injury makes him proud.

“To get through an incident that long with so many people involved and not have any injuries is a testament to everybody’s professionalism and the care that they took,” he said. “It was a big one.”