

Burning Down the House

By Jeff COLL

Thirty years in the making, the UPEI student centre faced a few more obstacles this summer.

In early July, after several weeks delay due to contractor tendering, Meridian Construction and its various subcontractors began the process of incorporating the framework of the Alumni Gym into the overall design of the new UPEI student centre. With the construction under way, things finally seemed to be going smoothly for the new Student Centre, which will serve in part as a replacement for the Barn - a building that was intended to serve only as a temporary student union building when it opened thirty years ago.

According to a brochure released by UPEI, the new student centre will become the focal point of campus life. In addition to housing the offices for the UPEI Student Union, *The Cadre* and *The Nexus*, the student centre will include the Panther Lounge, the UPEI Bookstore, the student health centre, a day lounge, some pool tables and a cafeteria.

On August 1, however, a new

setback in the construction of the student centre occurred. Hot slag found its way from the roof of the Alumni Gym - where Prebilt Steel workers were welding - to the floor, and set the building ablaze.

As the fire progressed, people on campus came out to watch. One of the witnesses was UPEI Student Union President Cynthia Dennis, who recalled her initial disbelief, followed by relief: "We were just basically like, well, it could have been worse because if the wind had been blowing the other way, it would have set Main on fire, and the whole campus would have been on fire."

Despite the unfortunate nature of the fire, President MacLauchlan managed to be positive about the fire at an August 30 press conference located in front of the construction site. "It's a day to be proud of and to celebrate some heroic efforts, said MacLauchlan, standing before an audience that included Charlottetown Mayor George MacDonald, reporters and members of the university community. It is about the heroic efforts of our students who have worked for years to achieve a new Student Centre, of fire fighters and UPEI staff who ensured that the August 1 blaze did not do more damage, and of a whole community that wants to see its University improve."

In addition to President MacLauchlan's tales of heroism, three volunteer firefighters - Angus Orford, Mike Ready and Robert Flanagan - were presented with small fire extinguishers as a gesture of appreciation for their efforts to extinguish the fire. The firefighters were all UPEI alumni.

Because of forensic investigations surrounding the fire, construction was set back roughly three weeks. With the investigations and the fact that the Gym's original framework needs to be reconstructed, there had been some concern that the



Don't stand too close, Bill. You'll get a wicked case of hot ass.

opening date for the student centre would be pushed back. "The good news," said MacLauchlan, "is that even though there has been a setback of a number of weeks because of the fire, we're still looking for completion and occupancy for the beginning of the academic term in the fall of 2002, which indeed was the date that we had been really shooting for all along. So in many respects we're on schedule."

"They're going to go lightning speed to get it done," said Dennis in an interview previous to the press conference. It's not in Meridian's interest to be any longer, and they have to get as much done as possible before winter sets in because [the building] has to be closed in so they can build."

According to Dennis, the additional costs that will be needed to reconstruct the framework of the Alumni Gym will be incurred by UPEI's insurance during the process of negotiation with the contractors' insurance companies. Such negotiations are typically lengthy, observed Dennis, and it is best if UPEI pays for the costs in order to prevent any

delays.

The August 30 press conference also served as a call for fundraising on the part of UPEI, which must raise the final \$1.7 million to complete the building. The PEI government has contributed \$1 million to the project and the UPEI Student Union - through student fee charges and a mortgage - has raised \$2 million. "The bottom line is the students are leading the way no matter how you count the thing," stated MacLauchlan. "I've been using that and continue to use that as a challenge to others to do their part."

One of UPEI's incentives for donors includes naming gifts. Donors can sponsor and name certain areas of the student centre, including the cafeteria and the day lounge. For \$1 million, a donor can even select the overall name of the student centre.

Concluding the press conference MacLauchlan made it clear that raising the final funds necessary is a priority: "Anyone who has got any brainwaves or bursts of generosity on that front, we'd be glad to hear from you."



Cynthia Dennis at Student Centre press conference.