



Explosion at YLS

The Yale campus was quiet on the overcast afternoon of Wednesday, May 21, 2003. Most undergraduates had left New Haven for the summer.



Yale College seniors, who would graduate the following Monday, were away on Senior Week pilgrimages to Myrtle Beach or other southern locales. The Yale University Library was already operating on its reduced-hours Summer Recess schedule. Offices and departments were looking forward to the summer lull that punctuates the rhythm of the academic year.

But the Law School, which has a slightly different academic calendar from the rest of the University, hummed with activity. Professors worked in their offices. Staff members made preparations for the upcoming Commencement Weekend. Students studied in the Dining Hall and Student Lounge; others were in the computer cluster taking final exams; still others rushed to finish up their SAWs in the library.

Suddenly, at about 4:40 p.m., a loud bang. A few seconds later, the building shuddered.

Sari Bashi '03 had been in the Dining Hall and was just about to take the Grove Street elevator to the second floor when "I heard a loud boom and

what felt like something very, very heavy being dropped next to me. I stepped out of the elevator and turned the corner to the Main Hallway. The air was thick with debris and dust. I couldn't even see Room 120, but I did see, across the hallway, a door that had been partially blown apart. That's when I realized there had been an explosion."

Associate Dean Ian Solomon '02, was working in his office on the second floor near the Faculty Lounge. He heard the explosion, followed by calls of "Get out!" from the hallway. He got out, joining hundreds of YLS staff, faculty, and students who had also rushed outside as the alarms began to sound. Standing on Wall Street, Solomon heard reports of the explosion and the damage it had caused from three people who had been on different floors. He figured that, whatever had happened, it had been significant. His immediate concern was "Is everyone out? Is everyone okay?"

The New Haven Fire Department responded within minutes of the explosion. They were joined at the scene by Yale and New Haven Police,

Opposite views of the rooms damaged in the explosion. (this page) Looking from Room 120, past the destroyed wall that used to separate the two rooms, into the Alumni Reading Room. The paintings remain undisturbed on two walls; all of the portraits have since been removed and are being cleaned and restored at an off-site conservation laboratory. (opposite) Looking back into Room 120. The door in the lower left corner was partially blown off in the explosion. These pictures were taken after a significant amount of rubble had been cleared away.



Connecticut State Police, U.S. Marshals, and agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In the meantime, news services picked up on the initial reports of the incident, and within half an hour, major national and international news outlets were reporting a bombing at Yale Law School. Families and friends of YLS students, faculty, and staff called cell phones and sent off “Are you OK?” emails, hoping for reassuring responses. YLS alumni all over the world called classmates and colleagues for the latest updates.

Several chaotic hours passed, while law enforcement personnel secured the building and determined that there had been no injuries or casualties as a result of the explosion. But relief at this great good fortune turned quickly to concern about other pressing issues. The entire Yale Law School building was now the scene of a criminal investigation, and no one was allowed entrance. In their haste to evacuate the building, many had left behind wallets, cell phones, computers, keys, prescription medication, airline tickets home, and other personal effects. Some students had left in the middle of taking an exam. Students and visitors who lived in the now-off-limits dormitories and guest suites had no place to stay. Power to the building had been cut following the explosion, which meant the School’s website wasn’t functioning, and students, faculty, and staff couldn’t access the files and documents stored on the School’s servers.

YLS deans and senior administrative staff and University officials worked late into the night on Wednesday creating a “virtual YLS” while the physical site was unavailable.

Temporary dormitory space was arranged in Ezra Stiles College, an undergraduate residence hall. A temporary Registrar’s Office was set up in Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall, so that exams could still be administered for those students who wished to take them. (Late Wednesday night the FBI and ATF escorted members of the Registrar’s Office into the building to pick up exams, blue books, and other supplies.) A temporary website was set up (still viewable at www.yale.edu/law) where the YLS community could receive regular information about the incident.

By 9:00 p.m., members of the YLS community had gathered in the Common Room of Ezra Stiles College. Dean Anthony Kronman addressed the shaken group, providing as much in the way of updates and encouragement as he could. University counselors were also on hand to provide assistance. More practical aid was available in the form of \$20 bills that Associate Dean Carroll Stevens provided to students who had no money. Associate Dean Natalia Martín took orders for toothbrushes and other necessities that could be purchased at the 24-hour pharmacy down the street.

Meanwhile, back in the Law School building, Associate Dean Mike Thompson, who served as the principle liaison between YLS and the criminal investigation, was one of the first people from the Law School to see the room where the blast occurred. “Room 120 was divided between a part that looked completely undisturbed, as if it had just been set up for a class, and another part where tables and chairs were tossed about and broken,” he recalls. “The most dramatic

damage was to the wall that separated Room 120 from the Alumni Reading Room. I'd say around sixty or seventy percent of the wall had been knocked down, toward the Alumni Reading Room. Some of the portraits that used to hang on that wall lay on top of the rubble; others were buried in it. The cabinets on the Alumni Reading Room side of the wall were crushed. In addition, part of the wall had broken off and fallen down the open stairwell to the lower level of the library."

The explosion also left a pattern of scorch marks on the ceiling and broke some of the overhead lights in Room 120. A single sprinkler head broke off in the explosion, soaking the area. A bank of windows in Room 120 also sustained damage. Several stained glass medallions shattered, in some cases leaving shards of color in their wrought iron frames.

At 8:30 a.m. the following morning, another Community meeting was held in the Stiles Common Room. YLS staff brought doughnuts and coffee and Dean Kronman brought more \$20 bills and reassuring words for students anxious about their exams and papers, their backpacks and laptops, their prospective travel plans. "Try not to worry," he said, exhorting them to keep their spirits up and promising to attempt to accommodate extensions to examination schedules and paper deadlines.

At that same time, a few blocks away, a core group of about fifteen YLS staffers were setting up a Command Center in a special office space, provided by University Secretary Linda Koch Lorimer '77, on the second floor of Woolsey Hall. There was much to do. One person finalized arrangements for students to make use of Yale School of Management computers. Another set up meals at Stiles College for the YLS Community. Another negotiated with airline

representatives on behalf of students who had to change their travel plans. YLS Admissions Office personnel fielded calls from concerned admitted students.

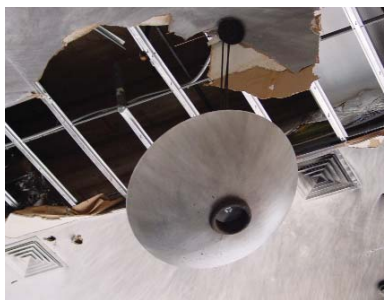
And as the Command Center got up to speed, the Registrar's Office staff set up shop across the street in Room 114 of SSS Hall, distributing, collecting, and proctoring exams and fielding queries from students about grades and graduation credits. The Registrar's Office would remain open in this temporary space through the weekend.

Work also kept up a hectic pace back at the Law School, as law enforcement officials continued their investigation, sifting through rubble and dusting for fingerprints. And in the upper basement level of the Lillian Goldman Law Library, a team of seven University conservators and Law Librarian Blair Kauffman hurried to transport books from the stacks of the Paskus-Danziger Rare Book Room, which had been partially flooded when water flowing from the broken sprinkler head in Room 120, which is above the Rare Book Room, seeped under the floor and onto the stacks below. The sodden books were

taken to a walk-in blast freezer at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where they were flash frozen to minus thirty degrees Celsius to prevent any further damage. This will allow librarians and conservators time to determine the proper course for conservation and repair of each of the affected volumes. But the assessment from the experts is that no book was damaged beyond repair. Gisela Noack, chief conservator of the University Library, says "We got to it quickly, and kept the damage to a minimum... Overall it was a satisfying and successful operation."

The looming question on

Thursday and Friday was where the Law School's Commencement Weekend activities would be held. Dean Kronman wanted both Monday's Commencement ceremony and



Sunday afternoon's reception for graduating students and their families to be held in the Law School. But that depended entirely on the progress of the criminal investigation and whether the FBI and the police would release the building. On Friday afternoon, a delighted dean announced that the Law School building would be available for both events.

There were some logistical complications, however. Although the reception wasn't until Sunday, the Dining Hall staff had to get into the kitchen the day before to clean and prepare. To facilitate this, special arrangements had to be made with the FBI, which posted a guard at the door to the kitchen to keep anyone from interfering with the crime scene. Mike Thompson says of the several law enforcement agencies he worked with, "They were all very helpful and went out of their way to get us back in the building as soon as possible."

In the middle of a Commencement

weekend drenched with rain, Sunday afternoon and evening boasted the only clear skies. The traditional Dean's Reception for graduates was held in the Law School courtyard, and most faculty and students re-entered the building for the first time since the explosion. The areas immediately surrounding

Room 120, the Alumni

Reading Room, the

Student Lounge, and the

lower levels of the library

were blocked off with plywood walls, but the barricades were draped with velveteen curtains in Yale blue, and hung with banners showing reproductions of some of the Law School's stained glass windows.

On Monday, Commencement Day, it rained. And rained. And rained some more, thus compelling Dean Kronman to make the decision to move the Law School ceremony to the Lanman Center in the gym (*see related story, page 12*).

The Tuesday following the explosion was

the first day the building was re-opened for normal work. Dean Kronman called a meeting in the Dining Hall for faculty and staff, to update them on what had happened in the previous several days. Representatives from the University's Human Resources Department and University counselors were also on hand, along with a representative of the Yale University Police Department, to offer assistance and advice. "People were concerned," says Karen Alderman, director of human resources. "They felt vulnerable, as if their safe environment was violated." Kathy Slater, assistant director of

human resources, adds, "It was a wound.... But there's a lot of comfort in going back to the routine."

Repair and reconstruction is already

under way behind the plywood barricades as crews from Turner Construction and electrical and HVAC contractors work to ready the damaged areas for the coming school year. "We're going to do everything in our power to have it completely functional by the first day of classes," says Mike Thompson. Room 120 and the Alumni Reading Room will be restored to nearly the exact condition they were in the day before the explosion—with upgrades to acoustics and technology. In many cases, this restoration will be accomplished by working from the same plans used in the 1998 renovations. All of the millwork—the cabinets in the Alumni Reading Room, the molding around the air handlers, the stairway railings—will be reconstructed by the same subcontractors who made the original pieces. The Law School also has photographs of all of the stained glass medallions, and will try to piece back together the broken ones. Those that can't be repaired will be duplicated based on the photographs.

University conservators will continue to work on the rare books damaged by the leaking sprinkler head, and special

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painting conservation consultants have been retained to treat and repair damage to the portraits that hung on the walls in Room 120 and the Alumni Reading Room. Miraculously, the majority of the paintings escaped significant damage (only three of more than thirty paintings in the rooms were seriously affected)—although most will require a thorough cleaning.

The investigation into the explosion of May 21 is ongoing. The Law School continues to cope with the aftermath, and over the summer, a YLS committee will conduct a thorough assessment of the Law School's policies and procedures and recommend improvements that balance freedom of access and movement with the need for a safe and secure building. Through all of this, however, one important fact remains primary in everyone's mind. As Dean Kronman noted in his Commencement Address: "There is nothing that has happened to our building that can't be fixed. But if one person had been hurt or killed in the explosion, the loss would be beyond our power to repair. I will always be grateful for what we have been spared." ∞