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>

Texas Regents Fire Tenured Professor at San Antonio Campus for Creating Safety Hazard

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By JENNIFER K. RUARK

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A tenured chemistry professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio was fired Thursday on charges that he had threatened the safety of colleagues and students by improperly storing corrosive chemicals in his laboratory and keeping too many books in his office.

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The university's Board of Regents voted, 8 to 0 with one abstention, to terminate Philip L. Stotter, rejecting a unanimous finding in January by a university hearing panel that there was not good cause to fire him. The decision ends the professor's 35-year affiliation with the university, 28 years of which he spent on the San Antonio campus. In 2000, an alumnus established the Philip L. Stotter Award in Organic Chemistry to honor his former professor.

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"I fully anticipated teaching and doing research for 5 or 10 more years," Mr. Stotter, who is 60, said on Monday. "I don't know why the university did it."

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University officials, saying they do not discuss personnel matters, would not comment on the case other than to confirm Mr. Stotter's termination. A federal lawsuit that Mr. Stotter filed against the university in 2001 is pending. The suit alleges that the university violated Mr. Stotter's constitutional right to due process when it hired a hazardous-material contractor to clean up his lab last February.

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"They entered my lab and stripped it of more than 35 years of fine chemicals and synthetic samples," said the professor, who specializes in developing new reagents and synthetic procedures. He would not say whether the suit would be amended to include claims based on his firing, and he referred further questions to his lawyer. She could not be reached for comment.

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According to an Associated Press report, university officials in the past two years had repeatedly urged Mr. Stotter to clean up his office, which they said posed an extreme fire hazard because he was storing about 100 boxes of books in it. He removed about 40 of the boxes, but his lab was closed in January 2001 for containing too many corrosive chemicals unsafely stored.

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Mr. Stotter agreed that he was storing too many chemicals but said he was waiting for the completion of a chemical-storage facility that he had encouraged the university to build. "I have shown a dramatic concern for safety in my career," he said. "I was the primary mover in designing one

of the safest and most effective chemistry teaching labs in the country, and for making sure that the university has a separate building for the storage of research chemicals."

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The university's president, Ricardo Romero, told the Associated Press that "every attempt to get this person to act responsibly failed." He did not return calls from The Chronicle.

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The hearing panel, made up of three professors, had found that while Mr. Stotter's lab clearly posed a safety threat, the university shared some of the blame for the persistent problem because its safety rules were vague and open to interpretation, the Associated Press reported.

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"I'm not sure where my career is going to go," said Mr. Stotter. "The idea of an equivalent professorship elsewhere seems unlikely."