

Lab explosion causes one injury, damage

■ A graduate student sustains second-degree burns after his chemistry experiment flares up in a USF laboratory.

By **ABBIE VANSICKLE**
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — As professor Mike Zaworotko explains, there's always an element of risk in chemistry.

But a chemical reaction in a University of South Florida laboratory early Tuesday morning drove home the lesson for an organic chemistry graduate student.

Gerald Rowland, 25, suffered second-degree burns to his right arm, abdomen and pelvis — about 11 percent of his body — during a flash fire in the university's Natural Environmental Sciences building, said Tampa Fire Rescue Capt. Bill Wade.

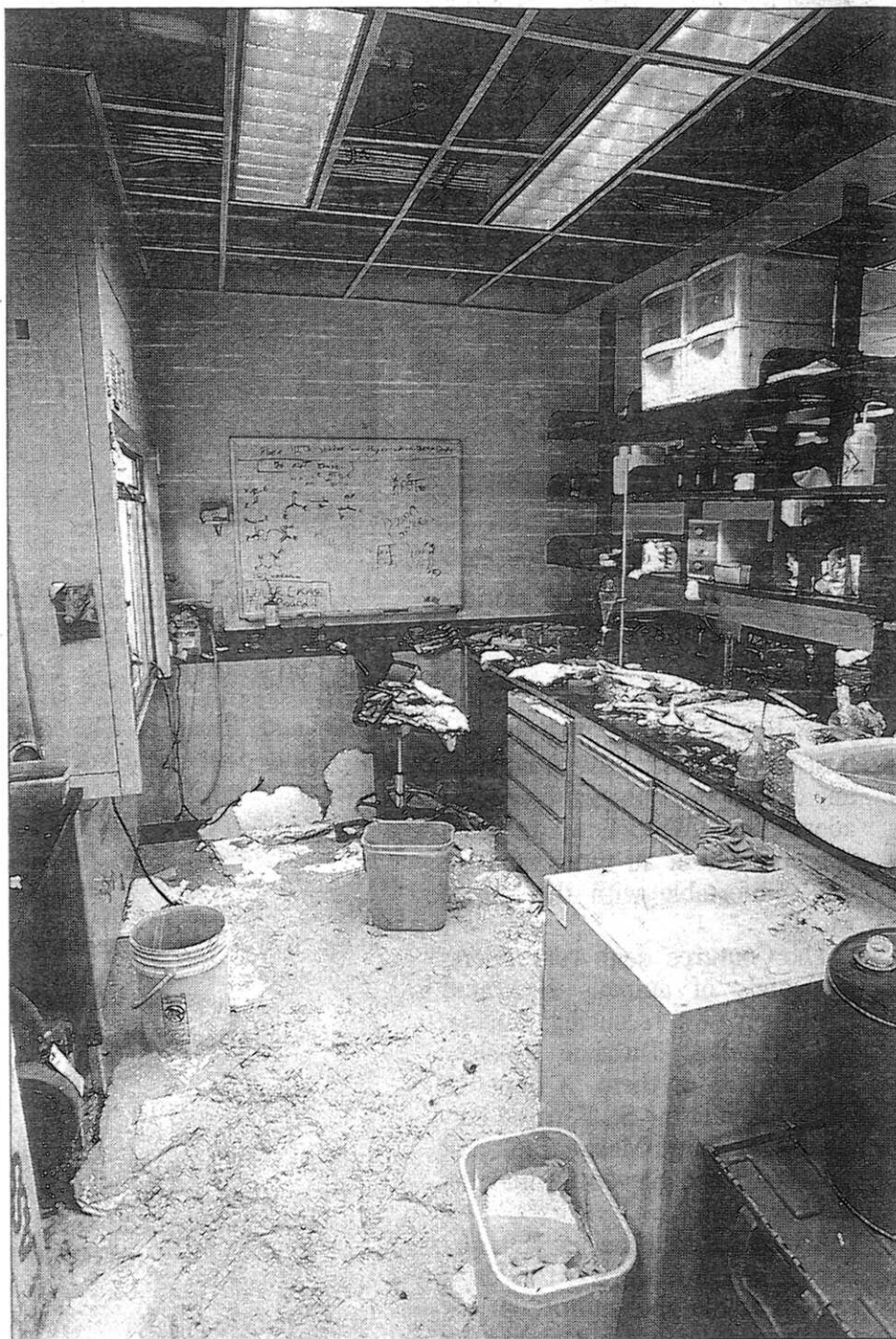
"It's not a trivial situation," said Zaworotko, chairman of the university's chemistry department.

By Tuesday afternoon, Rowland had been treated for his burns and released from Tampa General Hospital. He could not be reached for comment.

After 1 a.m., Rowland and several other students were working inside the glass and brick structure that sits among other science and math buildings on campus.

Rowland, who began his studies at the university in January, was working on what Zaworotko called a fairly routine experiment that involved heat and chemicals dichloromethane and diethyl ether, Wade said.

Rowland told fire officials he was heating up chemicals when the container broke, exposing the mixture, Wade said.



Times photos — KEN HELLE

This third-floor lab in the University of South Florida's Natural and Environmental Science Building was damaged after a small fire during an overnight chemical experiment injured one graduate student.

It's not uncommon to find grad students working late into the night on research projects, and Rowland had clearance to be in the lab, a large open space on the building's third floor, Zaworotko said.

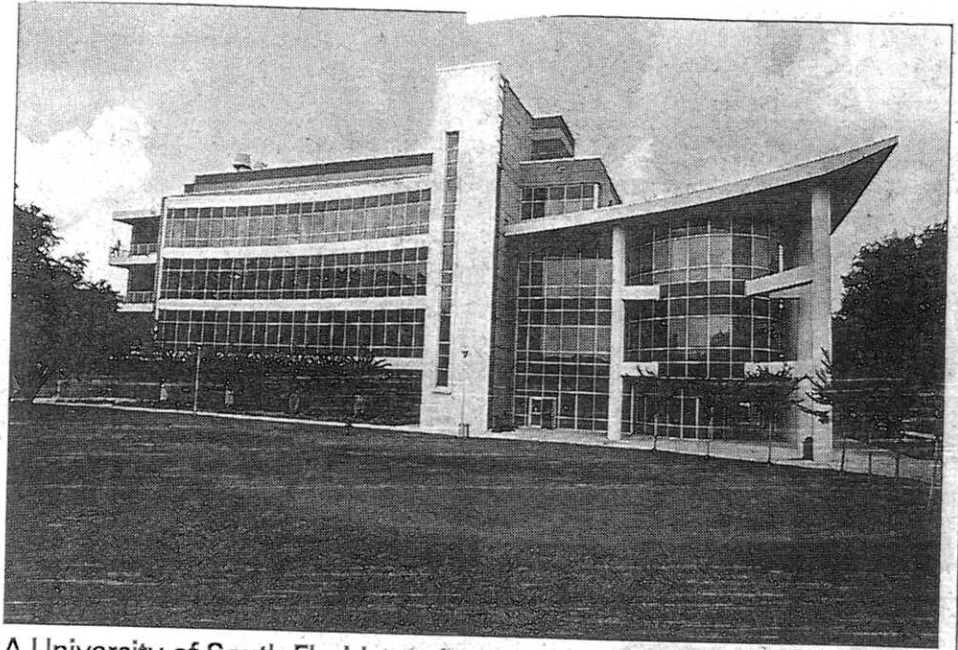
Grad student Julio Garay-Jimenez, 41, was across the hall from Rowland when he heard an explosion. He grabbed a fire extinguisher and tried to put out the flames before leaving the building, Wade said.

When rescue workers arrived, they found four grad students in the parking lot. Only Rowland was taken to a hospital.

The building was closed for several hours while investigators cleaned up the water and chemicals. It reopened just after 11 a.m.

Ceiling tiles in the lab must be replaced, but there was no structural damage to the building, said university spokeswoman Jacqui Cash.

An internal investigation will explore whether changes need to be made to ensure safety in the lab, she



A University of South Florida spokeswoman said the school's Natural and Environmental Science Building suffered no exterior damages in a fire caused by a chemical experiment early Tuesday morning.

said.

Zaworotko expressed relief that Rowland's injuries and damage to the building were minor.

"It was bad, but it could have been worse," he said.

Abbie VanSickle can be reached at 226-3373 or vansickle@sptimes.com.