

North Texans pull together in the cold

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After the temperature plummeted to record lows and the power turned off across North Texas this week, Josephine Lopez Paul led more than two dozen volunteers in making hundreds of phone calls to neighbors asking what was needed to weather the latest storm.

Clifton Reese slid over the ice-covered streets in the Bonton neighborhood to deliver firewood to his uncle, who was one of the millions of Texans without heat, and soup to other families in need.

Juan Solorio dressed his 3-year-old in multiple layers and wrapped her in blankets, covering her ears for hours as the fire alarm blasted at his Irving apartment complex until the building's power went out — again.

“It’s just been chaos,” Solorio said, reflecting on the strand of catastrophes that have defined America in the new decade: the worst global health crisis in 100 years, the economic downturn, a racial reckoning, the election.

And yet, as each of these North Texans and millions more faced another extraordinary challenge, they held on to a bit of hope.

Community, faith, purpose — and, at times, professional help — are helping North Texans get by.

“We don’t have control over the virus, the economy, our electricity. But a deep belief in other people can get you through a lot,” Lopez Paul said.

It’s unclear what sort of long-term effects the ongoing collective trauma will have on the public, said Kelli Laos, chief clinical officer at Metrocare, which provides mental health services — especially for poor or uninsured residents — across Dallas County. But the immediate need is clear. Metrocare saw requests for help increase throughout last year.

In December, Metrocare saw 13,501 people — a 12% increase over last year, a startling figure considering that the number of appointments typically dips during the holidays, Laos said.

To continue helping Dallasites during the winter storm, Metrocare made all appointments virtual. It was something that wouldn’t have been possible before the

pandemic, which pushed state officials to relax regulations around virtual visits.

“We have to be available to folks,” she said. “We’re making it work.”

On Monday, Metrocare had 1,152 appointments scheduled.

Staying connected

When Dallas isn’t frozen to its core, Marian Williams is usually out and about in her Buckner Terrace neighborhood and church. Most recently, she started registering people for the COVID-19 vaccine.

On Monday, after checking on friends and neighbors in the neighborhood, she called City Council member Adam Bazaldua and told him she would make spaghetti for families at warming centers.

Blacks and Latinos have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Racial justice issues and the election have shown the power of organizing to make change, especially in recent months.

“Black folks don’t have a choice,” she said when asked what kept her going through all the trauma. “You don’t have time to stop. I was brought up, you just have to keep pushing. Have a pity party for five minutes. Then pray and call on someone.”

Others soldiering on through this week echoed Williams’ grit and preached the value in staying connected with others.

Reese, who manages the Market at Bonton Farms, said focusing on the “real things” — God and his South Dallas neighborhood — was getting him through. “Our focus is to make sure we can serve the community in any way,” he said.

On Monday that meant bringing food to homebound people trapped in one of Dallas’ most notorious food deserts.

“There’s no such thing as convenience when it comes to this neighborhood,” Reese said.

Social media bonds

Soraya Santos, an online administrator for the chatty Facebook group Reform Dallas, said it was that group — which counts more than 12,000 members — that has helped her to grieve the loss of her cousin and sister who both died of COVID-19.

The deaths don’t feel real yet. “It’s hard to remember she’s gone,” Santos said of her sister.

The Facebook group is part-passion, part-responsibility. Santos said she hopes the digital town square encourages voters in often-forgotten municipal elections. An added byproduct is creating bonds with other civic-minded people.

“When it comes to trauma, it helps if you’re surrounded by people who care about the same things you do,” she said.

Recently recertified to register voters, Santos spent part of her Monday thinking about how she was going to safely enroll voters for upcoming elections. For starters, she’ll put

a sign on her fence letting passersby know she can help.

“COVID is not going to stop,” she said. “A blizzard is not going to stop me.”

Foundation in faith

The series of crises has reaffirmed the need for togetherness, said Lopez Paul, the lead organizer for the Dallas Area Interfaith, a nonprofit that organizes church groups for progressive policy changes.

“People are surviving day by day — sometimes hour by hour,” she said. “The one thing that has gotten us through this is the sense of community.”

The Rev. Joshua Whitfield of St. Rita Catholic Church has performed too many funerals since the pandemic hit North Texas. Yes, the majority of people he has buried are older, but they’re still dying too young.

“The sadness is real,” he said. “I sense there have been a lot of early exits.”

But in the coronavirus’s wake, he’s seen a renewed sense of fellowship.

“People have stepped up and served others,” he said. “And that’s been really sustaining to me.”

Whitfield canceled 6:45 a.m. Mass on Monday. However, the church has served as a vital communication hub, he said, and that didn’t stop with the storm. He said he texted parishioners who never miss a daily Mass, sharing his decision to temporarily close the church.

“The genuinely faithful older people I don’t want getting in the car,” he said.

How has he coped? Turn to prayer and silence. Laugh. Especially at yourself, he said.

“Hopefully this week will melt at some point.”

Focused on future

Plano resident Marcos Mateus was one of the lucky ones who didn’t lose power early during the winter storm. But the events of the last year have changed his life.

His wife, Caitlan, temporarily lost her job as a hairstylist. And when she gave birth in June — as COVID-19 was peaking in Dallas County and the civil rights protests were at full steam — they were locked in a hospital without family to support them.

“Luckily, I had the baby to focus on,” he said.

It’s his new baby boy that keeps the family going as they face new challenges. Caitlan’s parents, who are natives of the Philippines, are stuck in Texas due to travel restrictions.

It was not as easy of a snow day for Solorio, in Irving, and his two children. His teenager has been taking classes at home as the virus took hold of his school, Solorio said. After hours with no power, he bundled up the 3-year-old and 13-year-old to warm them up in the car. Several neighbors in his apartment complex were doing something similar.

For these dads, focusing on the future their kids will inherit after all the pain is helping them through the winter tempest.

“My kids are keeping me going,” he said. “We have to get out ahead for them.”

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