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TAMU'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

PART 10 OF 12: NAVIGATING THE CORONAVIRUS

TAMIU 50th Anniversary

TAMIU's 50th anniversary Navigating the coronavirus

By Christian Alejandro Ocampo
Laredo Morning Times

TAMIU has stood as a pillar of higher education and community service for decades since its completion, and students, staff and administrators have dedicated years to the Laredo community. Highlighting the position, the Trailblazers Tower was completed in January and is a physical beacon of TAMIU's goal to provide

support in Laredo.

However, right in the middle of the school's year-long celebration of their 50th anniversary, the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic and plunged into months of uncertainty. But according to the school, the tower and the spirit it represents from TAMIU's members has continued to stand strongly in the face of the unknown.

"It's no surprise then that as we all move forward through the COVID-19 pandemic that TAMIU has stepped forward to help its commu-

nity," TAMIU president Dr. Pablo Arenaz said. "We're 'TAMIU Together, we're Laredo Together.'"

Lockdowns and personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages challenged the Laredo residents, but through the multiple challenges they've faced, chosen members of TAMIU rose to help and serve their community once more.

Since its beginning, staff, faculty and students have not only worked to continue the education of the thousands of higher ed students but have also worked to help the com-

munity using their positions at the university as well as their specialties of their careers.

Giving back during the crisis

TAMIU started off its handling of the coronavirus crisis by donating 110 sampling kits to the Laredo Health Department at the beginning of April. According to Dr. Bruce Akey, the Director of Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory, the kits were assembled in College Station and were created to help early testing.



Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU President Dr. Pablo Arenaz is pictured with Laredo Health Department Director Dr. Hector Gonzalez as the school donated 110 COVID-19 sampling kits.

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Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU officials showcase the aerosol boxes made for the city to help battle coronavirus.

“We are assembling the supplies into sampling kits here in our College Station lab,” Akey said, “We know that 2,000 may not seem like much when there are 20-plus million Texans at risk that may need testing, but if you need to be tested and you can’t right now because they don’t have this kit, then it’s a pretty big deal to you and your family. So we are doing what we can right now.”

According to Laredo Health Department Director Dr. Hector Gonzalez, the

sampling kits were put to immediate use at the department’s lab.

Later that month, Dr. Tariq Tashtoush worked with TAMIU engineering students to create masks, shields and an aerosol box to support Laredo first responders and increase their level of protection.

“I’ve been impressed by the partnership and innovation in this project ... to see the design process change to reflect the need has been inspiring. We really appreciate

the university’s partnership on this,” Laredo Councilwoman Nelly Vielma said.

Using 3D printers, they were able to produce eight aerosol boxes, 12 facemasks and 40 shields soon after the lockdowns were initiated.

“This opportunity is a very unique and great approach to show how engineers can help their community in all situations,” he said. “Our engineering students showed their ability to implement the engineering design knowledge

they learned in their classes to produce solutions that meet a need while considering public health, safety and welfare, and global, cultural, social, environmental and economic factors. We worked together to solve all challenges and came up with affordable and available alternatives to reach our goal of providing local first responders the equipment they need.”

Efforts from across multiple fields continued to focus on helping the community.



Dr. Tariq Tashtoush

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From a community garden, resuming traditional community service events, continuing student education and providing necessary items to essential workers, TAMIU worked alongside many frontline workers to aid during the pandemic.

As the stay-at-home ordinances restricted families to their homes and only allowed them to go out to buy groceries, many stepped out to prepare. Lines were long, and many would be unable to purchase the items they needed including senior citizens, handicapped citizens and anyone with specific vulnerability to the virus. To provide some relief, 50 bags of vegetables from the garden were handed out to TAMIU students, faculty, staff and the general public in May.

According to the university, the garden was established in 2016 to be a source of locally farmed produce for students on campus. Additionally, Dr. Marcela Uribe, the Service-Learning Center Director, said that she hoped it would attract volunteers to learn more about sustainability and food production. In 2020, it undoubtedly proved useful and was a good example of preparing for the unexpected.

“Individuals interested in becoming part of the council will be able to take care of the garden, help organize community events, learn more about growing their own food and offer support to future service-learning courses that might participate in the garden,” Uribe said.

Building a home for a local veteran

TAMIU associate athletic director Dan Lathey and members of TAMIU athletics helped in the com-



Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU athletics members helped to build a home for a local homeless veteran.

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munity efforts by providing a home to a local homeless veteran. As a result of efforts from Lathey, Ricardo Quijano and other members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9194, Marine Corp. veteran Mark Nagele received a home in the middle of the pandemic.

"It was a very emotional day," Nagele said. "I was in shock at first as I couldn't believe it as it was just something that came out of the blue."

The team worked with Project Green Zone to help remodel an old shipment container into a home, a partnership created years prior to the pandemic. The container was provided by Project Green Zone, and Nagele can now enjoy a larger home with appliances included and a bright blue coat of paint.

Lathey and other members of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9194 started caring for other veterans in the community approximately eight years ago. It started as a barbecue during a TAMIU baseball game that evolved into a way to help veterans in need. From providing scholarships to student veterans to participating in Building Homes for Heroes, their contributions have been noted throughout the years.

This year, Lathey and the Texas VFW postponed the barbecue but still managed to fix up a shipping container to provide a home for Nagele. Despite COVID-19 interrupting plans, Nagele can now live more comfortably in a new home.

Lathey said that he expects efforts to increase as the years continue and said that Laredo can expect much more. One of the plans is to create a Veteran Village near TAMIU for homeless veterans. The proximity will allow them to get assistance in



Courtesy of TAMIU

finding a job or getting their education.

Transitioning to remote work

As efforts to curb the virus ramped up in March, students and

university staff were put in a difficult situation. With the week of spring break to think, the university acted quickly to transition face-to-face classes to an online environment in

that same week.

Using live lectures, recorded and on-demand lectures, virtual meetings, and the Blackboard eLearning platform, students and educators could continue the semester from the safety and comfort of their homes. According to TAMIU provost and vice president of Academic Affairs Dr. Tom Mitchell, students and faculty redefined the classroom experiences and created multiple ways to enhance the students' participation.

"Music faculty members including Dr. Abby Lloyd, the assistant professor of music, and Dr. Mark Boseman, the assistant professor of music, have repurposed their instrument-focused studio classes into Zoom meetings with students," Mitchell said. "That's brought the added benefit of inviting other music professionals to join in and present masterclasses on Zoom, including percussion, clarinet and saxophone."

Julio Dominguez, a junior English major and U.S. Marine veteran, said his first week in a virtual environment had its challenges but was not difficult. Dominguez continued his classes and interacted with classmates through the available apps like WhatsApp and Blackboard.

"The experience was new," he said. "The world is always changing, and in these uncertain circumstances, we need to be able to adapt quickly and to not be left behind."

Additionally, TAMIU students Michelle Rivera and Juan Barrera said they had adapted easily and felt the transition went off without a hitch.

"I had to take a couple of exams, but it wasn't my first time taking an exam online so there weren't any problems," Rivera said, "My lectures are done through Zoom, and I

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Courtesy of TAMIU

TAMIU's e-Learning team

liked that I could attend class in the comfort of my own home.”

As a Roma resident, Barrera was grateful for being able to work from home and wanted to take advantage of the times, no matter how uncertain they were.

“Drastic changes have been affecting all of us,” he said, “But after all of this, I just know we will appreciate even the tiniest details such as going grocery shopping and knowing that you’re never too old for hugs and kisses.”

Delivering the community help

TAMIU professors such as Dr. Ediza Garcia, Dr. Jonathan Murphy,

Dr. Irma Cantu, Dr. John Kilburn and Kristina Valenciano have all taken to the streets of Laredo to provide support. From outdoor food deliveries, helping students cope with their stress and more, they have been doing their best to help the community who helped the university reach 50 years of higher education. Additionally, the students of the TAMIU Student Philanthropy Council donated the funding they received from their 2020 Class Giving Campaign to help their peers during the pandemic.

Valenciano, the Events Services Manager and HealthyU Wellness Coordinator, led the creation of coloring book sheets for parents

and children to ease their minds and share some time together. Additionally, the College of Education provided parents and educators free online tool kits, and its students created virtual learning environments as supplemental guides for distance learning.

Dean of the College of Education Dr. Jarmes O’Meara said he was honored to be given the opportunity to help teachers and parents. Two tool kits were created. One was for caretakers and parents that focused on building healthy relationships and how to develop boys and girls into compassionate and caring adults. The other helped teachers us-

ing research-based knowledge, tools and practices.

“The TAMIU College of Education prepares the majority of educators within a 150-mile radius. We’re enormously proud of our graduates and our programs,” O’Meara said. “We’re a lead South Texas partner in the Texas A&M University’s System’s ‘We Teach Texas’ campaign. This is our mission and our passion, and we are happy to share our resources with our hometown. As we have said throughout the university’s response to the pandemic, we are ‘TAMIU Together, Laredo Together.’”

The virtual learning environ-

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ments were videos that focused on subjects including English, math, science, Spanish, physical education and more. Students filmed themselves explaining different topics in their subject of choice and noted what age level the lesson is suitable for and for what education specialty.

Awards and partnerships

For their many efforts and the university's response to the pandemic, the 2020 Educate to Career College ranking placed TAMIU in Tier I for higher education institutions for their response.

In order to reach the highest tier, a university should have a full curriculum online and in the classroom but is required to have a strong distance learning program, experienced distance learning faculty and reasonable tuition and fees, the ETC stated.

And for long-term support, the university also partnered with the U.S. Census, Webb County and the City of Laredo to promote the importance of the census and encourage the community to fill it out before the deadline. To promote it, students were filmed providing in-

formation and highlighting its importance regarding the allocation of funds by the government. They also detailed that the census deadline will be on July 31 and there are no citizenship questions.

As time passed since the initial outbreak, TAMIU staff and students continue to work hard to support their community.

"The 50-year history of Texas A&M International University is hallmarked by



Photo by Danny Zaragoza/Laredo Morning Times

continuous engagement in the betterment of its hometown beyond its overarching mission of higher education. Through this engagement, the university has measurably advanced and improved life here," Arenaz said. "From its earliest days as Texas

A&I University at Laredo on to its identity as Laredo State University and now TAMIU, the university community has always championed engagement, leadership and service in a broad spectrum of initiatives with lasting impacts."


For more information on TAMIU's 50th anniversary, follow TXAMIU on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Spotify, use the hashtag #TAMIU50 and visit the school's website at 50.tamiau.edu.

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