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Goodworks: In Houston, A COVID-19 Storm

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GOOD WORKS

Colby alumni impact the world in many ways every day.

In our “Good Works” section, we introduce you to alumni who are using their Colby education to make a difference in their communities.

IN HOUSTON, A COVID-19 STORM

MARLEN GUERRERO '18 USES HURRICANE HARVEY RELIEF EXPERIENCE TO FIGHT THE PANDEMIC

BY GABE SOUZA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALLAGHAN O'HARE



Marlen Guerrero '18, a Posse Scholar from Houston, Texas, began helping families long distance from Mayflower Hill after Hurricane Harvey hit her hometown. She continues that work, but recently saw her nonprofit pivot to address needs during the pandemic. She spoke with Colby Multimedia Producer Gabe Souza.

How did you move from hurricane relief to COVID-19?

I work for a local home-repair coordination system, Harvey Home Connect. We help local nonprofits connect to clients. COVID-19 hit, and since we had this base of clients that we knew were some of the most vulnerable in Houston, we figured why not connect people to these resources? But also we're measuring the need.

What did you find people need in the midst of the pandemic?

Financial assistance, food assistance, utilities. And we're also seeing that people are feeling insecure about being at home all day. They're feeling anxious, hopeless.

What do you do about that?

We're not the ones who are actually facing clients—we're the ones connecting. Large cities and states have set up these COVID-19 funds to help essential workers, undocumented families. We set up a Community Impact Survey and aim to capture the social and economic needs of households here in the Greater Houston region.

The hope is that the data will help large and small nonprofits to actually better target families and better distribute aid within the system. With Harvey there were a lot of resources available, but not a lot of people have the ability to connect them to the resources. We bridge that gap.



Marlen Guerrero '18, a Posse Scholar from Houston, Texas

How did you get into this line of work?

Hurricane Harvey hit first semester my senior year at Colby, so I narrowly missed it. I was getting these messages from my parents saying, “Hey, you know, there’s a big storm coming. We’re thinking about evacuating.” I would turn on the TV to see news about this large storm coming toward Houston and seeing the aftermath—people stranded, carrying their belongings above their heads. And so I was thinking, what are ways I can help from afar? Because of my family background, some of my family members had issues with work, either employers were pressuring them to come into work under dangerous conditions, or they were out of work. And so I was just like, that’s wrong.

But you were at Colby.

And a lot of frustration kind of pent up in me. And so I started getting more into hurricanes, even though I’m a biology and sociology double major. So even from my bio classes, at one point I did a report on how Hurricane Katrina affected herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians) in southeastern Louisiana. And so I was just crazy about hurricanes, either socially or biologically.



I WANTED TO COME BACK, NOT ONLY FOR MY FAMILY, BUT ALSO TO GIVE BACK TO THE TOWN THAT RAISED ME.”

—Marlen Guerrero '18

What do you mean, socially?

For a Jan Plan project, I was able to get connected to an organization here in Houston that serves undocumented families. At the time Harvey hit, there was a proposed law here in Texas, the show-me-your-papers law. It essentially gave police officers the ability to act as immigration officials and ask for documentation that you’re a U.S. citizen or if you’re “legal.” And so when Harvey hit, people were scared. There were people in the coast region who wouldn’t leave because they were afraid to go through the checkpoints. That was one of the biggest questions people had when they were calling immigration hotlines: can I go to these shelters and not risk being detained? And so their frustration translated to the Jan Plan.

So what does it mean to you to be able to help your own hometown?

It’s the best thing. I mean, when I was gearing up to graduate, I wanted to come back with the mission of helping people. I wanted to come back, not only for my family, but also to give back to the town that raised me. There’s this hashtag—Houston Strong. And it’s really a part of the culture here.