

# Power grid failure leaves



On the outside, snow blanketed the Great Lawn early Monday morning. Inside St. John's, pipes burst, flooding bathrooms and caving in ceilings.

PHOTOS BY Charlotte Curtin and Marco Flores

By Ella Chen and Ella West

Among the long list of unprecedented events to take place in Houston over the last four years, Winter Storm Uri was a frigid yet unwelcome change of pace, blanketing the city in ice and snow and leaving over a million households without power or drinkable water. What began as mild Valentine's Day flurries turned into a weeklong struggle for warmth — and for some — survival.

Sun  
Feb. 14

36° 25°

When freshman Naina Pai's 7-year-old neighbor asked to see snow on his birthday, his parents set out to make his dream come true by renting an artificial snowmaking machine for the weekend that generated five feet of powder for all the neighborhood children and pets to play in. Little did they know that in the coming days, the inside of their house would drop to a frigid 40 degrees, and the snow outside would pile up even higher.

For days, Houstonians knew a volatile weather system was heading towards the city. The St. John's maintenance team spent the weekend preparing for the freeze by purchasing pipe parts and lining up plumbers in case anything burst.

Instead of the usual rush to buy roses and chocolate, Houstonians waited in long lines to purchase bottled water and nonperishables. At home, they wrapped pipes and covered bushes and flowers in a desperate attempt to salvage their landscaping.

"We had these old tarps that we used to wrap our citrus trees," junior Nyla Hartigan said. "We also wrapped our well with old bed sheets that I hadn't seen in awhile."

Two days before the storm hit Houston, it contributed to a 133-car pileup in Fort Worth that left six people dead. In Dallas, the temperature plummeted to below zero — the coldest day on record in over 70 years.

"My family really didn't prepare because we didn't think it would be that bad," junior Anshul Nayak said. "We were also super busy the week before that all happened, so we didn't have any time to prepare for the storm."

Nayak ended up losing power for three days.

Mon  
Feb. 15

23° 14°

Kennedy Black, a junior, woke up at 3 a.m. to find her house out of power. The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) had just begun to introduce rolling blackouts, and the Black hou-

sehold was one of the first to go dark. Several hours later, when the temperature inside of her house dropped to 45 degrees, her family searched desperately for a hotel with power and available rooms until they found one that had been closed but temporarily reopened to house people without power.

To make matters worse, Black and her family could not find food that night since most of the restaurants were closed. The understaffed hotel finally fed them at midnight.

"That whole week, I survived on protein bars, almonds, cranberries, bananas and the leftover turkey burgers that I made," Black said.

On a trip back to their house on Tuesday to pick up supplies and shower, they discovered there was no running water. When they returned to the hotel, the pipes had burst.

Monday was a school holiday, but classes would later be canceled for the entire week.

"It didn't feel like a break," Black said. "It wasn't relaxing in the slightest bit."

While some students were enduring blackouts that lasted from a few hours to several days, other students didn't feel the effects of Uri until days later.

Tue  
Feb. 16

32° 11°

When junior Sophie Trammell went to turn on the water in her upstairs bathroom, all she heard was a slight trickle. The pipes had burst.

"We were all panicked," Trammell said. "Nobody knew where the water was coming from, where it was going or how to turn it off."

Running outside to the water meter in a desperate attempt to shut off the water supply, Trammell and her family reached elbow-deep into the freezing water, which had submerged the meter.

"It was pretty damn chilly," she said.

With temperatures remaining below freezing across the greater Houston area, Tuesday marked the arrival of a long stretch without power, cellphone service or drinkable water.

"We wrapped and insulated all of our faucet bibs and water pipes that ran outside, but we couldn't reach any of the pipes under the house," Trammell said. "We figured that they would stay warm from the heat of the house, but then the power went out."

While many Houstonians thought the blackouts would be temporary, the number of households losing power grew exponentially. After junior Meeah Bradford lost power, she spent most of the day in her car listening to NPR.

With no power, people sought alternative means to

stay warm, including fireplaces and space heaters. Bradford wore two layers at night and slept in her parents' bed to keep warm.

Across town three children whom Bradford coached in fencing passed away.

After starting the fireplace to stay warm, the Nguyen family home caught on fire, and the children, aged 5 to 11, along with their grandmother, were unable to escape.

Bradford was heartbroken. "They were so little and had so much more to experience," she said.

During her time coaching the children, Bradford became particularly close to Colette, the youngest.

"I'm at the point in my life where, although it is unfortunate, I have had to deal with sudden loss many times," Bradford said. "But this one just knocked the wind out of me. It's a type of pain that I think I will carry with me for the rest of my life."

Wed  
Feb. 17

36° 30°

With an estimated 1.4 million households without power, junior Charlie Leach and his family were fortunate to still have electricity due to their close proximity to the Bellaire police station, so they opened up their home.

Leach described his house as a kind of "sanctuary for people without power."

His mother Kristen, who runs Challenger League, an organization that enables children with disabilities to play baseball, took in one of the league families.

Leach worked with his family to reduce any loud noises that could trigger the children who had autism. They disabled the doorbell, placed towels under pots and pans and tried to stay as quiet as possible.

Charlie and his two brothers also housed several friends. All told, 14 people stayed at the Leach home.

Leach and his brothers spent the week sleeping on the floor in their parents' bedroom to create more room for the guests.

"Everybody had to pitch in on the meals," Leach said. "There would always be someone else that would walk in the door saying that their power just went out."

Having more than a dozen people under one roof solved one problem but presented another.

"Obviously, we were concerned with Covid, but at the same time, you can't just let your friends freeze," Leach said.

The medical community, including St. John's parent Dr. Christina Propst, expects an uptick in the number of Covid-19 cases in Texas over the next few weeks.

"It's the perfect storm," Propst said. "People have to cluster indoors for warmth and shelter, so they are going into an indoor situation with multiple people

# Houstonians on thin ice

who are not in their day-to-day household."

Joshua Pesikoff ('87), an SJS parent, has worked in the energy industry for over 20 years. Seven years ago he founded Infuse Energy, a retail electricity provider. According to Pesikoff, at the time of the winter storm, ERCOT grid operators had no choice but to shut off power to a third of Texas. If they had not, the grid would have become imbalanced, causing blown transformers that could have taken months to repair.

"The deeper question is why did one-third of the state's generation go?" Pesikoff said. "And why didn't it produce enough power?"

Power plants were not properly weatherized, even after state officials recommended such precautions after a winter storm hit Texas in February 2011. While the most recent freeze shut down some wind turbines, the bigger issue, according to Pesikoff, involved gas-fired plants.

"Wind works in Antarctica. Solar works in space," said Eleanor Cannon, who teaches a senior elective on oil and energy. "It's not that we can't use those. It's that they were not fully winterized."

Rather than seeking assistance from the federal government, Gov. Greg Abbott spent the day tweeting about frozen wind turbines causing power failures. Abbott later walked back his statement to place the blame more on ERCOT, but by then social media posts blaming inoperative wind turbines — and by extension the Green New Deal — had been widely circulated.

"I was upset that politicians decided that during this human crisis, it was a great time to start bashing on wind power, when they should be focusing on making sure that their citizens are safe," AP Environmental Science teacher Graham Hegeman said.

Thur  
Feb. 18

37° 28°

Despite preparing for the freeze, the prolonged time without power left St. John's with over 20 burst pipes.

"Some of the problems we had were because the temperatures were so low," said Richard Still, Director of Safety & Facilities & Physical Plant. "But having no power magnified them a hundred times."

In English teacher Allyson LaBorde's classroom, the porous ceiling tiles collected water from a leaking pipe and collapsed, filling the room with over two inches of water. By Monday, the maintenance crew had the room back to normal.

The storm also damaged the Chao Center, gym basement and Mewbourne Hall.

The St. John's maintenance crew, including Salvador Aquino, Byron Ortiz, Jose Florez, Marco Florez, Carlos Chavez, Jose Hernandez, Rubin Hernandez, Jorge Valero, Jim Fussell, Ahmed Tibary and Marco Gonzalez spent the entire week on campus making repairs and preparing for students to return.

"We wanted to have all of the kids back on campus as soon as possible," Still said.

Despite dangerous driving conditions, the maintenance team came to campus every day, then left school to address damage to their own homes.

"I would leave here around midnight and go home and start working on water pipes and my house," Still said.

Preparations made before the storm saved the school from more damage that could have taken weeks and tens of thousands of dollars to repair, according to Still.

While not all water fountains are functional, they were not as important as fixing classrooms and the fire sprinkler system since students are not allowed on campus if the sprinklers are out of order.

Over the coming weeks, Still expects to see residual effects of the storm, including weakened and broken pipes.

"The repairs were more difficult than after Hurricane Harvey," Still said. "With Harvey, there was standing water. This time we had to wait to see if the pipes would leak because many were frozen."

Fri  
Feb. 19

48° 25°

As cellular service slowly returned, people took to social media, not only to share their experiences but also to vent their frustrations over how so much devastation could have been avoided.

"It's so annoying because this could've been an entirely different situation," Black said. "El Paso had the same amount of snow, and they didn't have any problems."

Those who have lived in Houston for more than 10 years were frustrated by how similar this storm was to the one in 2011.

"The federal government told Texas that we had these problems," Cannon said.

On Wednesday, Feb. 17, former Texas governor and Secretary of Energy Rick Perry posted a blog on the website of House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) in which he wrote, "Texans would be without electricity for longer than three days to keep the federal government out of their business."

While recommendations were made for energy companies to winterize equipment, the lack of regulation meant that they were not required to make changes.

"Even though these events are going to be rare, we've had two in the last 15 years," Hegeman said. "We can be pretty certain that we're going to have another one, and it's a pretty huge risk to public health to not winterize because

we don't have them every year." Cannon attributes this situation to deregulation in Texas, which began in 1999 under Gov. George W. Bush. Two power grids provide electricity to the continental United States, while Texas maintains its own grid in order to limit federal oversight and ostensibly keep prices low. Yet according to the Wall Street Journal, electric bills in Texas were \$28 billion higher than those of customers in a regulated system.

Sat  
Feb. 20

57° 32°

Elizabeth Schaefer has worked at the Houston Food Bank every Saturday for the past nine months. When she went in to volunteer on Feb. 20, she got to meet Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY).

"This was one of the top 10 days of my life," Schaefer, a junior, said. "I have looked up to her work since I started really getting into politics."

Schaefer did not know that Ocasio-Cortez would be there to help. All she knew was that there would be more people in need of food and water than usual.

"I was really impressed," Schaefer said. "She really did work and volunteered among us. It felt like more than just a photo op. I hope to see more politicians do that in the future."

The Food Bank delivered 30,000 boxed meals over the next two days, and Ocasio-Cortez raised over \$5 million to help Texas families recover from the polar vortex.

For many across the state, Saturday was spent trying to make repairs.

When English teacher Warren Rawson tried to call a plumber to fix his broken pipes, he was the 160th person on the waiting list. His leak was not fixed for another 10 days.

With the Texas Legislature preparing for their biennial session in May, Rawson hopes that lawmakers will finally take action to prevent another weather-related disaster.

"I want ERCOT to prepare for the worst disaster they could imagine, because people's lives depend on it."

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## Storm sparks volunteerism

By Russell Li and Afraaz Malick

MacKenzie Rice woke up on her 15th birthday to the most snow Houston has seen in decades. Less than 10 hours later, her family had lost power, and her birthday was soon forgotten.

"The snow was fun in the morning, but as the day progressed, the lost power [situation] shifted from celebration to What can I do to help?" Rice, a freshman, said.

Alongside her mother, an executive at Texas Children's Hospital, Rice delivered meals to thousands of healthcare employees who were working around the clock and sleeping at the hospital during the winter storm.

"I stepped in because they were dealing with a ton at the hospital," Rice said. "They experienced water breaches, and their water shut down — it must have been rough to sleep there for days, let alone without food or water."

Rice began by calling grocery stores and restaurants — hundreds each day. Many establishments, such as Sprouts Farmers Market, Raising Cane's and French Quarter Cajun Seafood, opened solely for the flurry of orders that Rice and her mother delivered to the hospital.

Rice jokes that the dozens of trips she and her mother made between the hospital and food establishments qualified them as "temporary Uber Eats drivers." Even though she could not reach many businesses, she persisted: "Whatever challenge I was going to face today, there were going to be so many people who would be willing to find a solution."

Rice observes that crises like Winter Storm Uri reveal the selfless nature of Houstonians.

"It was cool to see that just like in a flood, people were still willing to do whatever they could," she said. "During hurricane season, I would also help however I was able. Now that I'm in high school, I have more accessibility to serve the community."

On Sunday, Feb. 21, senior Ken Matsunaga helped set up donation stations for food, toiletries and water at Finnigan Park. In conjunction with Mutual Aid Houston and the Houston Democratic Socialists of America, he aided over 1,200 people. Matsunaga also recorded the Cash App or Venmo information for those in need, such as a single mother with multiple children, who received donation funds.

"I realized how fortunate I was," Matsunaga said. "I had enough food and water at home to sustain myself, I wouldn't be in massive amounts of debt if my electric bill spiked, and I had clothes to keep myself warm."

Matsunaga says that mutual aid collectives like those he volunteered with are becoming increasingly common as more people are in food lines and facing eviction. The pandemic and winter storm have strained social safety nets.

"They want to do something about this economic inequality we are facing," Matsunaga said.