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Coping Through Community

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As cleanup and power restoration have progressed at the University of Dayton following a windstorm five days ago, students, faculty and staff have come together to maintain safety, cope with shortages and make the most of an inconvenient situation, said Sister Annette Schmeling, R.S.C.J., vice president for student development and dean of students.

Although 2,400 students living in north and south student neighborhoods have been affected by the outage, Schmeling said the past few days have been somewhat idyllic with students grilling out, studying and singing on their porches. They've been largely good-natured, and as needs arise, they're willing to help, she said.

"Students have just responded so well to the crisis," Schmeling said. "Our students are acting like adults, staying focused on what they're doing and why they're here."

Unlike other residential campuses in the country, the private, Catholic University of Dayton literally owns neighborhoods — more than 350 single-family houses and duplexes with front porches characteristic of an old-fashioned, close-knit community — and the vast majority of students live on campus.

So when the outage struck, the campus community rallied. Leaders of the Student Government Association called the office of public safety with an offer of help, and the campus police took them up on it.

"Chief (Bruce) Burt called Monday at 5 p.m. and asked us to meet at 6 p.m.," said Emi Hurlburt, student government president. "With an hour's notice, we had about 25 of our 65 members there to help."

They delivered bottled water to Campus South, an apartment building that was in the dark and short of water pressure, and flashlights to the north and south student neighborhoods with reminders not to use candles or other open flame. As night fell, the flashlights were as much a source of entertainment as a source of light, as Schmeling said they initiated possibly the world's largest game of flashlight tag.

Schmeling, who lives among her charges in the south student neighborhood, said the neighborhood has had an almost Norman Rockwell aura, and although challenging, the situation offered moments of compassion and satisfaction.?

She called a student to find out how things were going on Monday night, and the student learned that Schmeling was still without electricity.

"She said, 'Sister, we have power. You can come and stay with us.' I thought that was so nice. These students offered me a place to eat and sleep." She declined, but she appreciated the kindness.

Because classroom buildings, residence halls and all but one campus facility were not affected, classes were not cancelled. Students were offered free meals, showers, all-night access to study spaces and even a place to bed down.

On Sunday, when students needed lighted places to study and plug in cell phones, library hours were extended to 5 a.m. and even Kathy Webb, dean of university libraries, took a shift Sunday night. It was busier than normal with the power outage. When students asked for more lighted space, UD obliged.

"That was a magic moment," Schmeling said. "They wanted more academic space to study, and we opened up two more buildings."

RecPlex, the student recreation center, has been open each night of the outage as a place to sleep and shower. On Wednesday, student development and the neighborhood fellows - student resident advisors - both fed the hungry and comforted the afflicted with a barbecue and resident meeting in the north student neighborhood.

As of Thursday afternoon, about 500 students remained without power, and Joseph Saliba, interim provost praised faculty and
staff for their extra efforts to keep academics on course.

“All has not worked out perfectly,” Saliba said, “but given the impact of this regional emergency, the outcomes at UD have truly been impressive. The entire campus has pulled together, and we’ve been able to continue our students’ academic pursuits while still addressing the critical issues of health and safety.”

The absence of electricity brought out some old-fashioned entertainment. Senior civil engineering student Kyle Fortman said he and his housemates, all engineering majors, were bored Monday night until Mark Laubie, a senior in mechanical engineering, pulled out a Scrabble board. They played by dim light all evening. Laubie, who can both spell and do thermodynamics, won, hands down.

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