

NEWS

## Walmart in El Paso — long a symbol of bonds between two nations — reopens in defiance of massacre that left 22 dead

Shoppers and mourners crowded the reopened store. Others stayed away, emotions still fragile in the wake of the racially driven murders.



Employees and guests gather outside the Walmart store for a reopening event Thursday, Nov. 14, in El Paso. Customers returned to the store that been closed since August when a gunman opened fire at the store and killed 22 people. (Briana Sanchez)

By [Alfredo Corchado](#)

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EL PASO — The sales Thursday weren't out of the ordinary, but the the reopening of Walmart here, where 22 people were killed in August, felt like Black Friday — so packed that security guards were out directing traffic.

[RLH]

Parking was difficult and shoppers were determined. Some were teary-eyed as they walked into the store where Walmart employees standing near a Christmas tree greeted them with cheers, applause and smiles. More than three months after the racist-driven tragedy, shoppers walked through the doors of a renovated store that had been gutted with new fixtures and a new polished concrete floor, and interior design, and hopefully, company officials said, a new beginning. This Walmart, ground zero for a massacre, has for far longer been a symbol of the bonds between two nations.

“We’re pleasantly surprised at the overwhelming support from the community,” said Delia Garcia, a spokeswoman for Walmart, who stood in front of the Texas Supercenter, long an iconic landmark that embodies the binational spirit of this community. The store is less than 2 miles from the border with Ciudad Juarez, and Garcia said it’s one of the nation’s busiest stores, usually packed with El Pasoans and so many Mexican citizens that some simply call it “the Mexican Walmart.”

The parking lot reflected the region’s mix of people and nationalities with license plates from Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua and the curious motorists who got off Interstate 10 to get a glimpse of the reopening of the store.

Many confessed raw emotions. Others simply stayed away.

The last time Gloria King shopped at Walmart was on Aug. 3, the day an alleged white supremacist from North Texas drove for 10 hours, 700-miles, to “kill Mexicans,” as he later told police, and “stop the Hispanic invasion” of Texas, as he wrote in a hate-filled manifesto posted on the Web forum 8chan. The manifesto claimed then that Hispanic immigrants were replacing native-born white Americans and he hoped to kill as many as possible.

Authorities charged Patrick Crusius, 21, of Allen, in the mass killings. He has since pleaded not guilty and is awaiting a trial date.

“So many lives have been changed forever and while those affected are still struggling to cope with what happened, we have to turn the other way as they re-open today,” said King, 44, who works as an administrative assistant. “It’s difficult to enter that Walmart again because there is always the possibility that this will happen again.”

Others wanted, if not to forget, then to just move on.

Guillermo Gomez, 72, came for a pack of tortillas, some bread and fruit, “not much,” he said. “But being here meant everything. We will never forget. How can we? But we

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Angie Loera, 26, came to “face my fears. Send a message: We’re moving forward,” she said, confessing she also did some early Christmas shopping for her sons. She unloaded groceries and marveled at a rosary a woman handed her after she shopped.

“We have moved on as a community and no one, including the shooter, will define our lives. I don’t want him to feel like he won,” she added.

The store is constructing a permanent “Grand Candela” memorial in its parking lot, a tower of 22 light-emitting beams to honor the victims. Construction is expected within a week or so, Garcia said, noting that almost all of the 400 employees who worked at the store before the Aug. 3 shooting have returned.

After the shooting, locals from both sides of

the border built a makeshift memorial in the back of the Walmart store. The memorial took the form of an altar with pictures, rosaries, flags and crosses to honor the victims. On Sunday, relatives were invited to collect some of those personal items.

City officials said a selected few items were moved to a temporary memorial located at Ponder Park, a few blocks away. Other items were removed and cataloged for historical purposes.

The reopening of Walmart comes as El Paso and Ciudad Juarez celebrate a massive new project to pay tribute to their community, separated by the border, the Rio Grande and incendiary political rhetoric from the White House that many have blamed for the mass killings here.

The project is known as the Border Tuner, an artwork by international visual artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. The interactive searchlight is intended to highlight the complex and important connections between El Paso and Juarez. The Border Tuner is controlled by the voices of participants who are at any of the three interactive stations placed on each side of the border, from Bowie High School in El Paso to the Chamizal Park in Juarez.

Similar installations by Lozano-Hemmer have been installed in Philadelphia, Mexico

City, Vancouver, Japan, Montreal and Abu Dhabi.

The project officially opened Wednesday and will be visible in the night sky through Nov. 24.

Abel Mora, 17, munched on a hamburger Wednesday night and marveled at the lights over both communities.

“This helps break the border tension,” he said. “The talk about walls, the shooting at Walmart. This reminds us about our connection to one another.”

This weekend both cities take part in the 2019 U.S.-Mexico 10K run, with runners from across the globe.