An Extraordinary Season

Regardless of your distance from greater Boston, you likely know that Harvard slogged through a semester of record-breaking—and patience-testing—winter weather. The type of meteorological event immortalized by Ralph Waldo Emerson in “The Snow-Storm” as “…myriad-handed, his wild work/So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he/For number or proportion” buffeted our campus month after month, totaling more than 108 inches of snow. Temperatures—often in the single digits—stayed below 40 degrees for 43 consecutive days stretching from January to March. The view from Mass Hall was akin to peering out from inside of a snow globe and bracing for the next shake.

Harvard cancelled classes and suspended most operations for three days this year, but there is no such thing as shutting down the University. We have more than 10,000 students to feed and house regardless of the weather—and efforts to keep up with Mother Nature were nothing short of remarkable. Staff members kept pantries open and patrol cars running, and made trekking and traveling across campus possible. The University depended on their skill more than ever this year, and I, like countless others, am deeply grateful for all their dedication and hard work.

Snowstorms send us out and keep us in. True to form, the winter weather sent students sliding down the steps of Widener Library and warming up with comfort foods including some 1,500 gallons of soup. Fortunately, every residential dining hall remained open regardless of the conditions thanks to intrepid dining services staff who volunteered to work multiple shifts—sometimes agreeing to spend the night—to keep the kitchen humming. They found eager students, tutors, resident deans, and Housemasters who helped with everything from swiping cards to washing dishes, and they received rounds of applause and notes of appreciation for going above and beyond their responsibilities.

Other colleagues managed less visible, but no less essential, functions to keep the lights on and the temperature up for everyone who calls campus home. Harvard police officers were on duty no matter the weather, and shuttle services put vehicles on the road to ensure that students, faculty, and staff were able to travel safely. Landscape services cleared and recleared more than a hundred miles of sidewalks and pathways, wielding shovels and snow blowers, pushing Bobcats and Bombardiers, and spreading sand and salt almost as quickly as the flakes kept falling. If their equipment failed, colleagues stood at the ready to make quick repairs—an absolute necessity as hours of work stretched into days of work.

As inches rapidly piled into feet, the issue of where to go with the snow became more and more pressing. In late January, the University opened what has become known as the Allston “snow farm.” For two and a half weeks, the site was open around the clock, and truck after truck—up to 1,700 in a single day—delivered snow not only from Harvard, but also from Cambridge and Boston. Ninety percent of the 11-acre property was covered in piles that came to resemble a small mountain range—complete with a 60-foot peak. By the time the snowfall record was broken, an estimated 300,000 tons of snow had been transported to the site. As you read this, it is likely still in the process of melting.

To mark a new entry in the record books, the Harvard community gathered on the Science Center Plaza in late March and toasted with hot chocolate and s'mores, celebrating resilience, the people who worked to keep Harvard running this year, and the early signs of a welcome spring. The snow was as careless and as savage as Emerson describes, but it was also as beautiful:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,  
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields, 
Seems nowhere to alight: the whitened air 
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven, 
And veils the farm-house at the garden's end. 
The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet 
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit 
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed 
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Sincerely,

[Signature]