

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## El Paso Shoppers Return to Site of Shooting With Pride, Trepidation

'We need to carry on,' said one shopper at reopened Walmart supercenter, where 22 were killed in August

*By Elizabeth Findell and Sarah Nassauer / Photographs by Joel Angel Juárez for The Wall Street Journal*

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EL PASO, Texas—Cheers from a receiving line of employees handing out “El Paso Strong” bracelets greeted each person entering the Walmart El Paso Supercenter Thursday morning.

The reason for the enthusiasm: The site where a gunman in August killed 22 people is open again for business.

Earlier, employees met with Walmart Inc. Chief Executive Doug McMillon and Walmart U.S. CEO John Furner. Workers raised an American flag on top of the store to full height for the first time since the shooting and unfurled a banner reading #ELPASOSTRONG. A permanent “Grand Candela” memorial tower of 22 light-emitting beams is under construction in the store’s parking lot.

Walmart representatives said that reopening the store, which has been fully renovated since the shooting, is crucial for its workers to recover. The supercenter, which sits about 2 miles north of the border, is among the nation’s busiest, often packed with a mix of locals and Mexican citizens. Authorities believe the gunman targeted it to kill Hispanic people.



Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart, right, with employees during the official reopening of the supercenter.

The reopening of the store has stoked controversy throughout the community. But many on Thursday said

the reopening let them take back their store.

El Paso native John Mullady visited the supercenter multiple times a week before the shooting. He said his wife was too nervous to let him take their children on reopening

day, but he arrived at 6 a.m.—three hours before the store opened—to wait. When he and his mother, Kathleen, walked in the door, the emotion was so intense they forgot what they planned to buy and ended up walking around in a fog, grabbing random items.

“We missed it,” Mrs. Mullady said of the store, adding that after the shooting, “We need to carry on.”



Walmart employees greet shoppers during the official reopening of the Walmart.

Many echoed the sentiment, voicing pride in El Paso’s resilience. Martha Ruiz, 68, said the return felt like a homecoming. Before the shooting, she would often wander the store’s aisles on nights when she couldn’t sleep.

In the parking lot, families loaded turkeys into their trunks for Thanksgiving. A restaurant owner from across the border in Juarez stocked up on honey mustard, relieved that he could get back to his normal routine. Young people showed support for the store by grabbing chips and drink mixers. The line of cars trying to park backed up down the street.

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Some El Paso residents, however, said they would never return. Arnulfo Rascon, who was shot in the store, opposed the reopening, saying it won’t help the healing. Mr. Rascon, 56, a father of two and former

factory sales manager, struggles to walk after knee surgeries and still gets emotional reliving Aug. 3. He sees Walmart in his nightmares, he said.

Mr. Rascon is among more than two dozen victims and family members of victims who sued Walmart in the wake of the shooting. The company responded with a cross-claim against the accused gunman, saying the loss of life was solely his fault.

When Margie Lopez, 68, walked in the door, she didn’t hear cheering, she said. She heard screaming, immediately transporting her back to the day when she stepped out of her car in the parking lot and saw a woman running up to her, yelling, “He just killed my daughter.”

She thought visiting again might help her recover from the trauma. But in the store she was overcome with so much anxiety that an employee had to help her pay for a single bottle of water.

“Maybe I thought all this I felt would go away,” Ms. Lopez said. “I hope [the reopening] does bring peace to people. But I don’t know if we can ever move past it.”

The supercenter employs 375 people, the majority of whom are returning to work, said store manager Robert Evans. Two employees were among the 25 wounded in the shooting, one of whom was shot in the hand, while the other was shot in the buttocks, Mr. Evans said. One is back at work, and the other plans to return, he added.

Employees received three days of disaster pay and 14 days of extreme-hardship pay after the shooting, said Delia Garcia, a spokeswoman for Walmart. They were then transferred to work in other El Paso-area Walmarts. Since mid-October, they have been back to work at the superstore, preparing for it to open.

Over the past three months, the store has been gutted and renovated with a different layout and flooring as well as new fixtures, employee lounges and patios.

“We want our associates and our customers to see something different and feel comfortable coming back to our store and getting on with our lives,” said Mr. Evans. An El Paso native, he has worked for Walmart 21 years and been manager of the supercenter for seven.

Authorities have charged Patrick Crusius, 21, in the killings. Law-enforcement officials said he published a racist posting on the Web forum 8chan and then traveled some 650 miles from his home in the suburbs of Dallas to El Paso to kill Mexicans. Mr. Crusius has pleaded not guilty. His trial hasn’t yet been scheduled.

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