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Up in Smoke: Forgetting Your Troubles the Santa Fe Way

Revelers Burn Them in 'Zozobra,' a 50-Foot Bright Spot in a Bad Year

By STEPHANIE SIMON

SANTA FE, N.M. -- Happily remarried, in a new city, with a new job, Carolyn Bourassa felt the time was finally right to get rid of her 10-year-old divorce papers. Somehow, though, the recycling bin didn't seem appropriate.

She wanted the papers burned -- flamboyantly, in-your-face torched -- in a symbolic act of closure and renewal.

Zozobra was just what she needed.

Every summer for 85 years, Santa Fe artisans have built a giant effigy of wood and chicken wire, then stuffed it with woes. They named the thing Zozobra, but many here just call him Old Man Gloom.

And when he is stuffed full, thousands of people gather to watch him set afire in a spectacular ritual of public catharsis.

So on Thursday, in the rain, Ms. Bourassa marched up to the "Gloom tent" set up in a city park and handed the darkest period of her life over to a stranger.

She had plenty of company. Jilted brides drop off wedding dresses to cram inside the 50-foot-tall figure. Cancer patients bring hospital gowns. Foreclosure papers and credit cards, police reports, photographs of old lovers and uniforms from jobs gone bust all end up inside the creature with mournful black eyes and an expression that leaves no doubt that he is bearing the weight of the world. When his long white robes are

ignited in a ceremonial bonfire, all the cares go up in smoke.

After months of soaring unemployment, shrinking investments and failing businesses, anticipation was keener than ever for this year's bonfire. As the moment drew near on Thursday, more than 20,000 packed the field.

Through the afternoon and evening, people surged toward a collection box to deposit offerings that would be dumped into Zozobra.

Red Torley, a retired teacher hoping to burn away fears about his son's health, kissed his letter before dropping it in. Stephanie Herrera, a baker, took a picture of herself bidding a symbolic farewell to her financial stress. "I wanted to catch myself saying goodbye to my worries," she explained. "It feels good. It feels freeing."

A journal with a pink polka-dot cover went into the Gloom Box. So did a business card from a mammogram center. And notes scrawled with single phrases capturing deeply personal heartache: Iraq. Diagnosis. My ex. Australia.

Eleven-year-old Alex Win grinned from ear to ear as he handed over his fifth-grade arithmetic book, based on a curriculum he found baffling. "I don't like math," he explained. "Especially that kind."

His little sister, 6-year-old Anique, looked on with big eyes. She had nothing to burn. Well, actually she did --

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a clear and present source of gloom. But her mother nixed the idea of throwing her brother into the flames.

The conflagration of calamities has been a tradition in Santa Fe since 1924, when an artist named Will Shuster invited friends to watch him burn a marionette he had named Zozobra. He was inspired, he later explained, by the Yaqui Indians of Mexico, who mark the week before Easter by parading an effigy of Judas through the streets, then blowing it up with firecrackers.

Word of Mr. Shuster's playful ritual spread and he soon began staging the bonfire for public viewing. Before he died in 1969, he turned the event over to the Kiwanis Club, which honors him by calling the festival "Will Shuster's Zozobra." Tickets are \$10; the money raised goes to youth programs.

For the past several years, Julia Goldberg, editor of the weekly Santa Fe Reporter, has served as Zozobra's guardian of gloom, collecting offerings at her downtown office throughout the summer and at the gloom tent on festival day.

She has learned not to pry.

Last year, a woman dropped off a baggie she said contained her late husband's ashes. This year, someone handed over car keys. A few powerful politicians have dropped off sealed papers -- and although the reporter in her senses a juicy story there, Ms. Goldberg says she never, ever peeks.

"It's some sort of gloom code of ethics," she said.

Ray A. Valdez, a contractor who volunteers his time to produce the festivities, also treats the glooms as a sacred trust. Last week, a woman came to the warehouse where he was building Zozobra and dropped off 500 engraved wedding invitations.

"I will not be needing these anymore," she said.

Mr. Valdez took them without comment and tucked them into Zozobra's belly, where the fire burns hottest. "This is a great service," he said. "I'm honored to do it for people."

Many participants say it is a powerful feeling to release their burdens in public, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with so many other careworn strangers, watching their

troubles go up in smoke. "It's so wacky and so lovely at the same time," said Carrie Eberhardy, who was recently laid off from her job as a social worker.

As dusk fell Thursday, the rain cleared, a band struck up "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and revelers lined up for cotton candy and funnel cakes. Shortly before 8, Ms. Goldberg shouted out: "Last call! Last call for gloom!" Procrastinators surged forward, pressing folded slips of paper into her hand.

With a whoop, Ms. Goldberg grabbed a locked gloom box, hoisted it to her shoulders, and motioned a few colleagues to follow suit with other boxes. The crowd cheered as the procession marched uphill toward the gaunt figure of Old Man Gloom. At the top, silhouetted against the effigy's flowing robes, Ms. Goldberg paused to raise her gloom box up high, for all to see. Then she dumped the town's misery into Zozobra's lap.

The giant creature, a functioning marionette operated by an unseen puppeteer, began to writhe against the dark sky, his fingers clawing, his head weaving, his jaw opening and closing in the suggestion of a howl.

A master of ceremonies took hold of the public-address system. "Shall we now send Zozobra to a fiery death... [and with him] the anxiety, suffering, heartache and gloom of our fair city?" he asked.

The crowd roared its response: "Burn him!"

Dancers swirled around the effigy, taunting him with flaming torches. Fireworks exploded. And then, to a cascade of cheers, Old Man Gloom caught fire, bursting into a five-story crackling inferno, and then collapsed.

Up in flames went a box of legal briefs from a medical-malpractice case. Up went an old cast, an unpleasant reminder of a snowboarding accident. A note from Barb and Scott Haurberg about their mounting business debt burned.

So did Ms. Bourassa's divorce papers.

"Those are my signed originals in there," she said. For an instant, she looked hesitant. Then she beamed. "I don't need them. I don't want them," she said. "I have a new life."

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