

## ***After Maria: Reflections on My Time in Puerto Rico***

**A Travel Journal by ABFE's Edward M. Jones**

Before even landing in Puerto Rico, it's clear from the many blue tarps dotting the landscape (most supplied by FEMA, we later learn) roof tarps dotting the landscape, that recovery is underway. It's been nine months since Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands (St. Thomas; St. Croix; St. John). The CHANGE Philanthropy network arrives in San Juan for a network retreat and to learn more about the status of the recovery efforts post-Maria. It's also two days before the start of the 2018 hurricane season. How many blue tarps are covering Miami or Houston? How many other cities in the contiguous 48 United States still have visible scars created by recent (or long ago) natural disasters?

Once on the ground, in some instances, it appears that things are back to normal. Cruise ships are docking, allowing passengers to enjoy a day trip to the island (which has been a port of interest for decades). Traffic is flowing; however, when you take a closer look, you'll see that there are some intersections where traffic lights are in a steady flashing mode. Others are dark—even steps away from the gleaming & modern government-led Department of Energy building. Steps further, you can see building frames where businesses used to be and a light post that has impaled another building. *It's been nine months...*

Media, pundits and elected officials have given us countless stories about what has happened once the hurricane hit. The recovery efforts are well documented. The blame has been spread wide. Part of the recovery efforts even included a much-photographed press conference where President Trump threw paper towels to people who just endured a life-changing disaster.

Hurricane Katrina and broken levees uncovered the neglect of the Lower 9th Ward and other sections of New Orleans. Similarly, Hurricane Maria has been said to be a peculiar blessing for the people of Puerto Rico. The world, again, learned more about the painful impact a natural disaster can have on a place already ailing from a man-made financial disaster and intentional neglect, arguably, fueled by anti-Brown racism. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" gave a raw look at the fiscal crisis in Puerto Rico in 2016. As always, humor makes the pain a little easier to manage, but the harm is evident.

The CHANGE Philanthropy network believed it was important to host our strategic planning retreat in Puerto Rico. There was urgent interest in learning more about how we can help our fellow citizens who have been forgotten. It was especially timely as CHANGE partners ABFE and HIP hosted a philanthropy learning tour in early 2017.

The frequency of disasters and headline grabbing stories in the world (natural and man-made) makes it hard for people to pay attention. The last victims are often forgotten when new issues take over the news cycle.

An eclectic, independent & locally owned property in Old San Juan was our base. A creative mix of colorful architecture and fortresses surrounded us. Our lodging overlooked La Perla, which sits on the edge of the ocean. Wiki describes it as a "shanty town."

*SIDEBAR: La Perla was established in the late 19th century. Initially, the area was the site of a slaughterhouse because the law required them and homes of former slaves and homeless non-white servants – as well as cemeteries – to be established away from the main community center; in this case, outside the city walls. Sometime after, some of the farmers and workers started living around the slaughterhouse and shortly established their houses there.*

La Perla is an interesting neighborhood; reminiscent of the famed favelas in Brazil – only smaller. If it were in a mainland community, it would be labeled "inner city," "ghetto," or the 'hood. It is clearly neglected, but full of character and community spirit—and enjoying an amazing view with the ocean at its doorstep. The CHANGE family experienced great local food, music and history lessons on our first night. It's not lost on any of us that there is a slave history surrounding us.

Our second day served us a reality check. That morning, we learned about the Harvard study on the death toll attributed to Hurricane Maria. *Four-Thousand-Six-Hundred* deaths vs 64 is far more than being slightly off in a casualty count. It is sobering but reflects what happens when people are made invisible. How can a casualty report be so inaccurate? Where was the federal and state government in seeking accurate numbers? Why would it take nine months to get to this and still only an estimate? Stunned by these figures, we moved on with our day, but this new information lingered in our minds.

Later that morning, CHANGE Philanthropy convened at a new, co-creative space called Parallel 18, the latitudinal line which crosses Puerto Rico. The co-working space is an exemplar of what could help fuel a Puerto Rico 2.0 renaissance—through technologies and innovation. The co-working incubator occupies an entire floor of a downtown office building and is filled with buzz. Its reach is global...and still growing; but its work is locally grown and operated. It was the perfect location to spark creative thinking for the CHANGE members in attendance. What we produced will be shared in the coming weeks and months, so stay tuned.

On our third day, we were able to immerse in more of what we came for: a tour where we would be introduced to organizations led by and FOR Puerto Ricans. People determined to not be defeated by the latest natural disaster. The tour was expertly designed to allow us an opportunity to see promising work and understand the challenges, born out of tragedy that was nine months prior. We embraced the chance to connect with the people, their stories and the distinct culture that makes this U.S. Territory a place that must be treasured, not erased.

We learned about the creative plans being imagined by the leadership on the island's oldest Boys & Girls Club (BCGPR). BGCPR is looking to create a stellar educational experience with a two-generation approach—to tap into the lucrative industries in PR, such as hospitality/tourism and supply/services. As the territory/state is making plans to close dozens of schools, the Boys & Girls Club is working on a forward-thinking learning experience. We also learned about the violence, unfortunately, seizing young lives; including state-sanctioned assaults. We learned too how leaders are taking lessons from the Cure-Violence work and finding success in stemming violence. Funders should want to be part of this endeavor.

We ventured to Loiza, coined "the heart of Puerto Rico's Black Culture." There, we ran into young men connected to another Boys and Girls club. They didn't know who we were, but one loudly said, "Welcome!"

Our packed agenda included a tour of the epicenter of the Afro-Latino Cultural Corridor. The plan, spearheaded by Marta Moreno Vega, who also heads the Creative Justice Alliance, will respectfully lift up the talent & resources of the community; not exploit. Maricruz Clemente Rivera, Director of Corporación Piñones se Integra (COPI) and Marta Moreno Vega, shared stories of Loiza. Like other Black-dominant communities, Loiza has been neglected. The vision for building the community is solid and in good hands around Roberto Clemente Way.

We also visited the home studio of renowned local artist Samuel Lind. He and his work were alive with stories and images of his true passion, the stories of the people of Loiza. We were so moved by our experiences, we took up a bus offering and raised over \$6,000 dollars! We *had* to do something, and that down payment was a start.

We made a long journey uphill to reach one of the highest points on the island, the mountaintop community Loma De La Nina Mariana. Getting there, took us along narrow roads. The rebuilding is very much still underway. Our large bus had to await an electrical utility as it was lifting electrical cables, which scraped the bus roof. There was no going in reverse; we had to move forward.

Once we reached to top we realized that the journey was worth it, and the community was certainly worth supporting. Breathtaking place. Christine Nieves, one of our storytellers, and other residents aren't waiting for a slow-moving government. They created Provector Apoyo Mutuo Mariana, with support from volunteers from around the mountaintop. It is a place that the community rebuilt and was abundant with family, food and music. Residents are sharing the work, building gardens, recycling their own water and creating places for children to

play. They freely give time, talent and/or treasure to support one another at this community gathering spot. They have embraced the village approach—even welcoming a group of dogs who found their way to the mountaintop and chose to stay. And they are amazing hosts, too.

Let's be clear, despite the ads you've seen to promote PR vacations, PR has been hurting for some time. Unemployment was a challenge before Maria. Most Americans don't seem to recognize PR as part of these United States; but they are. Even before Hurricane Maria destroyed parts of Puerto Rico last year, policies and practices have been damaging our Black and Brown territories for years.

We saw so much beauty on the island—from the rainforest to the surrounding ocean. We also saw a still wind farm, rendered useless because Maria ravaged the blades. We saw a solar farm that was destroyed next to a gleaming new one. *Again*, Maria. Surely, investors would rather starve the island and allow the land to be snatched up for pennies on the dollar—that's what happens to inner cities. But, this is a huge state (not a neighborhood or ward), that has been used like a playground for "the haves" for years.

Like other places that are touted as tourist destinations, the visitors use the locale to escape, but fail to acknowledge the humanity in and beyond the all-inclusive. People have seen the value in Puerto Rico; it is my hope that they also see the value in Puerto Ricans. It is their land and they are central to its future.

I felt an eerie irony in leaving Puerto Rico on the first day of 2018 hurricane season. I wonder what the communities will look like when I return. I pray it will be better and I KNOW Puerto Ricans are committed to making it better. Will the rest of these United States commit to the same? I wonder...

For photos of our time in Puerto Rico, click [here](#).