

NY stands with Puerto Rico was an initiative put in place by governor Cuomo in which he intended to help Puerto Rico. I was lucky to be selected to go on this amazing trip. I was placed in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico about 20 minutes from San Juan from August 12 until August 25. Toa Baja was one of the areas that was highly affected by floods because it is surrounded by many rivers and because the dam was closed too early before the hurricane landed, causing it to overflow and flooding the city of Toa Baja up to 9 feet. The Toa Baja recovery NGO organization was under all hands and heart an organization that has a lot of pride in their work and their mantra is to be there right after a disaster strikes and to be the last one to leave the disaster zone.

I always knew I had signed up for hard work, however, I didn't know how hard it was going to be our work consisted of deconstructing, roofing, cleaning, sanitation, cementing with our bare hands without the use of construction equipment. Our equipment consisted of a small power washer, scrappers, hammers, and other small tools. We work under 85 and up degree weather, however in Puerto Rico one moment it is raining the next is sunny. The first few days I remember getting back to base and just being beat and exhausted, my hands shaking and numb from so much scrapping, my legs burned because I didn't reapply enough sunscreen. As the days went by the work remained the same, but somehow your body gets used to it, the more you meet the families and their stories the more motivated you become. I always went back to base covered in either dirt, cement or roof sealant and for me that was alright because every day I knew I was giving someone their house back.

All hands and heart has volunteers from all over the world. I had the opportunity to interact with volunteers from England, Scotland, Poland, Australia, Spain and American's who

were there with the simple goal of making a difference. Every day we did stretch exercises in which each person gave a reason to be thankful for. Many of our activities focused on helping us cope with disaster, with being away from home, with our own perception and how the work and experiences were affecting us.

Almost a year after hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, many suburban areas of Puerto Rico were only getting their electricity back the week that we arrived in Puerto Rico and in the areas that had power it was very weak and glitchy. There were many houses without roofs, houses that from outside looked in good condition, but once you walked inside were covered in mold and still flooded from rain water. A lot of the houses in Toa Baja had flood insurance that they could not claim because the part that were damaged was the second floor not covered under flood insurance. Even though Puerto Ricans have gone through this horrible experience they are resilient people who are always there to help each other, many of the people that we help barely had money for themselves, but still managed to cook us some rice and beans so we could have lunch or will bring us mangoes from their mango trees or a liter of Pepsi or Coca Cola.

Puerto Ricans as cliché as it may sound changed my life, I learned to appreciate the little that I have, my bed, my shower, my family, my culture and where I come from. I went to Puerto Rico trying to find myself, I had to leave my daughter behind and my mother did not agree with me going, but I knew I had to go and I wasn't wrong in Puerto Rico I found friends that became family, I helped make a difference in someone's lives and even if time passes those memories no one could ever take away from me. I once read that "there is no better joy in life than getting lost in the service of other" and I agree with that because there is nothing more fulfilling than the peoples smile after they get their home back, or the locals coming to you saying that you for all

you do, is not the recognition that makes you feel better is knowing that you are making a difference that makes everything worth it.

I am so humble for such life changing opportunity, and I would recommend any future student that has the opportunity to travel abroad to do it, because that is an experience you will not regret, the life lesson and experiences you learn are priceless. I know that I will be graduating in May and this chapter of my career will come to an end, but I can assure that if there is a time in place in my memory that I will always come back to will be my time in Puerto Rico where I believed in humanity and myself once again. Thank you governor Cuomo, Thank you SUNY, Nassau community College, Monroe Community College, Nassau Nursing, all hands and heart and the amazing people of Puerto Rico I will always keep you all in my heart.