

Victor Hillergren      NCC Abroad in Puerto Rico

Volunteering with disaster-relief and recovery efforts in Puerto Rico this summer was an experience like no other. I'd never done anything like this and was hesitant to jump into it at first given it'd been a little while since I'd traveled abroad. I couldn't imagine where I'd be had I not done it. What was supposed to be a 3-week trip for me turned into almost 3 months. The only reason I'd come home at the time I did was to take care of things here, otherwise I would have continued the work there, which I intend to do upon returning in the near future.

Two years ago this month Hurricanes Irma and Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico, leaving thousands without electricity, running water, access to other basic resources and transportation to hospitals and grocery stores. People spent months in the dark, barely surviving under tarps and in other unpleasant situations. The amount of stories we'd heard in our time there could fill a library. As part of the wealthiest nation in the world, it's a shame these people are still dealing with the trauma and aftermath of such a natural disaster.

Fortunately, there are organizations such as All Hands and Hearts, and SUNY's New York Stands with Puerto Rico initiative that have been gathering students and kind-hearted people from all over the state and the world to volunteer with recovery efforts. It was incredible to not only meet amazing people from all over the state as we went down to Puerto Rico as a group, but to be part of this disaster-relief organization, AHAH, and discover the work they do around the world from Puerto Rico, to Nepal, Peru, Mozambique, the US, and now the Bahamas. Without this experience I would have been blinded to all this good and hope out there in the world, and I recommend anyone with time and opportunity to try this do so immediately.

The lifestyle we lived was one I'd not expected either. We were up at 6am every day with our boots on and lunches packed ready to go by 6:45. Our days consisted of carpentry and construction work building roofs, repairing doors and windows, mixing cement and laying concrete and sealant on leaking roofs, sanitizing mold on interior damaged houses, and best of all, interacting with homeowners.

The people there are so grateful to have us in their community working on fixing their homes that have been forgotten for far too long. Most of the time we were treated with coffee, breakfast, home-cooked lunches, snacks, fresh squeezed juice, and heart-warming conversations. They really welcomed us as family. There were times I still reflect on that really hit home: from being welcomed into someone's living room with their family for coffee, or hearing a story from a veteran who'd still not received any aid yet, yet remained humble as can be. The living conditions some of these folks grin and bear on a daily basis have left me with images I'll never forget, and a sense of gratitude I'll never let go of.

As a volunteer group, we'd slept on air mattresses in bunk beds with 50+ people in one room. You form bonds with strangers, find similarities with others you'd never assume you'd become friends with, you become family with these people, and the most painful part is having to say goodbye when the time comes. Yet we wouldn't have it any other way. If there's a single way to travel, it's this way. We ventured all around the island to explore the abundant and surreal nature

Puerto Rico has to offer from the beaches and colonial cities that surround the coast to all of the mountains and vast greenery in between.

There is so much underappreciated history in Puerto Rico still relevant to this day, still making history to this day. We were there when tens or hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest of removing their governor from office for mishandling FEMA aid and recovery funds. In meeting so many people from all over the world, it seems like the world all met here in this one location to form the global society we have today. The Caribbean in general has had such a pivotal role in history, connecting Europe and Africa to the Americas, and expanding from there over the past few hundred centuries to give us the world we have today. That energy, the magic from everything connecting and meeting still thrives and lives on today. You can feel it upon stepping foot in Puerto Rico, La Isla de Enchanta, it's otherwise known as.

For anyone with an interest in traveling, in music, culture, history, language, food, nightlife, beaches, surfing, hiking, nature trails, architecture, sports especially baseball, and of course assisting others in need, Puerto Rico is the place to be. As a well-seasoned traveler, I'd never experienced any other place like it and am itching to return. There is no better feeling than giving back, or giving more than you can offer to someone with so much more in need and at stake. Take care of the island, and the island will take care of you. Hope to see you there!