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SUNY New Paltz Students Discuss Trip To Puerto Rico

By ALLISON DUNNE • AUG 10, 2018


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Some students from the State University of New York at New Paltz travelled with a New York delegation to Puerto Rico in July for two weeks. They were there to rebuild homes following Hurricanes Maria and Irma nearly a year ago. The trip was part of the “New York Stands with Puerto Rico Recovery and Rebuilding Initiative.” WAMC’s Hudson Valley Bureau Chief Allison Dunne spoke with a few of the students who lent a hand.

Jonathan Germán is entering his senior year at SUNY New Paltz. He speaks Spanish and was able to help with assessments, deciding which houses the delegation had the tools, and electricity, to help rebuild.

“There was hundreds of houses that are in line just waiting for a service. And me going on and making these assessments and just hearing these stories from all these people who are just waiting for help, they’re waiting on line; uh, I’m thinking about it getting a little bit emotional,” Germán says. “It’s just crazy the devastation that’s still happening there.”

Dr. Amy Nitza is the director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz. She led the group of 29 SUNY students, including 14 from New Paltz, and worked alongside them. Nitza says she was greeted by an unexpected sea of blue tarps as the plane approached San Juan. Once on the ground, she says it was difficult to see those still standing, waiting for help, amid desolate neighborhoods many had fled. Nitza says the relationship between the homeowners and the students also struck her.

“The homeowners just seemed so deeply appreciative to have the students there,” Nitza says. “And one of my favorite anecdotes about that is that one of the women whose houses we were working on, she lived alone. And she started cooking, the second day we were there, she started to cook lunch for us. And then the third day, she made an even more elaborate lunch and she brought out her photo albums and she wanted to share pictures of her family and tell stories. And she said, I haven’t had anybody to cook for in eight months, and so you’re bringing back the joy of being able to cook for people for me. And so that was just really valuable for the students to hear. And I think it really helped make the connection between the practical work that they were doing, the hands-on work, and the emotional recovery piece for people as well.”

Here’s Jonathan Germán.

“After we finished on the work site, I started playing this Marc Anthony salsa song, and us, and all of us on the work site and all of the residents who lived in the neighborhood, we got on the streets and we just started dancing salsa, all throughout the street,” Germán says. “And, yeah, it was this absolute blast. It was just kind of moments like those that you just don’t forget.”

Catherine Keefe Harris, also entering her senior year at SUNY New Paltz, shares her dancing-in-the-street memories amid the rebuilding work.

“We worked on this one person’s home named Victor and him and his brother, which another group of us was working on at their site, they actually cooked lunch for us every single afternoon, like fresh fish right from the water. And we got to spend a lot of time with them and get to know their story, which was very emotional,” Keefe Harris says. “And they would always come up and be amazed at how much progress we were making on their roof, which is also really great. And after work we would get to dance with them in the street and play music, and that was always really nice. We got to know some people around the neighborhood. And they were really appreciative of the work that we were doing. They would tell us that we were angels over and over again. That was really incredible.”

Keefe Harris say the light construction work they thought they’d be doing was anything but.

“So it actually meant converting the second stories of people’s homes that got ripped off because we could only work on homes that had electricity for power tools and stuff like that. So we would convert the second story of people’s homes, and covert what used to be a floor into a new roof,” says Keefe Harris. “We made concrete, we cemented, we hammered and nailed things and did tile and pretty heavy duty construction on top of a hot roof all day in 95-degree weather, which was something that I think a lot of us were not prepared for, but we all learned a lot of construction skills, so that was awesome.”

After a few days, Germán says his aching body grew more accustomed to eight hours a day of hard, manual labor.

“And, honestly, we didn’t even feel like we did enough,” Germán says.

While the students were there, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo made his fifth trip to Puerto Rico since the hurricanes. He, too, climbed aboard a roof and lent a hand. Nitza found the collaborative effort to help in Puerto Rico successful, and one worth repeating.

“We were just there for two weeks, but the bigger piece of this is that 500 students were there over the course of the summer, which is a massive undertaking logistically,” says Nitza. “And so the combination of the governor’s office, SUNY, CUNY and UNICEF, which funded a big piece of this, I think that that model is really a model that we want to look toward in the future for how we can make these kind of efforts happen.”

Meantime, on Thursday, Cuomo said a report released by the Puerto Rican government estimates that more than 1,400 people may have died in the aftermath of the storm. Cuomo continues to rail against what he calls President Trump and the federal government’s incompetence and neglect of the people of Puerto Rico.

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