

AFTER THE STORM

Thousands of Puerto Ricans have fled to the U.S. mainland since Hurricane Maria struck last September. Back on the island, many residents have faced a long road to recovery. BY JOE BUBAR

DERICK ORTIZ AND Damara Navarro, both 17, grew up about 25 miles from each other in Puerto Rico. But their lives began to head in different directions on September 20, 2017. That's when the island was **ravaged** by Hurricane Maria, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded in the Atlantic Ocean.

In the coastal city of Fajardo, Derick and his family lived without running water and electricity for three weeks. The storm had wiped out power and most cell phone service to the island and damaged about a third of all homes. Derick's school and the hotel where his parents worked were shut down.

In October, his family made the difficult decision to leave the only place they'd ever called home. They

bid goodbye to their friends and relatives in Puerto Rico and started a new life in Orlando, Florida.

"I was crying," Derick recalls. "I grew up with them. They were the only thing I had, and now I was going to leave them behind."

Meanwhile, Damara's hometown of Loíza was hit hard with floods and heavy winds that knocked out power to its residents. Damara and her family remained in Loíza after the storm, but they have struggled to regain a sense of normalcy.

"People . . . lost their rooftops. Some lost their whole house," she says. "It was chaos."

Derick and Damara represent the



two paths Puerto Ricans took after Hurricane Maria: staying or leaving.

An estimated 200,000 Puerto Ricans have fled the island for the U.S. mainland since the storm. (That is 6 percent of Puerto Rico's pre-hurricane population of 3.3 million.) Those who left have had to start over in an unfamiliar place even though they, like all Puerto Ricans, are U.S. citizens (see *"The 51st State?"*, p. 10).

Those who stayed behind have faced a different struggle. While



Damara Navarro, 17
Loíza, Puerto Rico

"I wanted to survive [the recovery] in my home, not somewhere else."

major cities like San Juan have largely recovered from the storm, thousands of homes are still without permanent roofs. Electricity wasn't restored to all of the island until last month, and the power is still spotty in some areas.

Not Enough Aid?

Even before the hurricane, Puerto Rico had fallen on hard times. In the spring of 2017, the **U.S. territory** practically went bankrupt. About half a million people have moved away over the past decade, seeking economic opportunities elsewhere.

Hurricane Maria made things worse. More than 1,400 deaths occurred in the aftermath of the storm, according to the Puerto Rican government. But in May, researchers at Harvard University calculated that the storm may have

caused up to 8,500 deaths, many due to delayed medical care. Several people, for example, were unable to pick up medicine or reach hospitals because of poor road conditions.

That so many people may have died because of a lack of health care and other necessities angers many Puerto Ricans. They think the federal government didn't provide enough aid, noting that supplies were slow to arrive after the storm. For example, only 5,000 blue tarps, which are used as temporary roofs, were delivered to the island →

PHOTOS: KEVIN MAZUR IMAGES FOR ENCA; AP/WIDE WORLD; DAMARA NAVARRO: JIM HANCOCK/REUTERS/ISTOCK

in the nine days after the storm hit. (Four times as many were provided to Houston, Texas, in the nine days after it was hit by Hurricane Harvey last year.) Many people also complain that the workers hired to rebuild the island's **infrastructure** were inexperienced.

In July, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which handles relief after natural disasters, admitted that it had underestimated the devastation. In a report, FEMA noted that it hadn't anticipated how much food and water Puerto Ricans would need and how long it would take to ship supplies to the island. FEMA also said it had failed to grasp Puerto Rico's "insufficiently maintained infrastructure."

Maria's Aftermath

The lack of assistance forced many families, like Damara's, to live in crisis for months. Her town of Loíza—home to about 30,000 people—was hit hard. After the



Derick Ortiz, 17
Orlando, Florida

"Coming to [Florida], I was very scared. But . . . everything was so welcoming."

storm, she often waited hours at the gas station because so many people needed fuel for generators. Sometimes the tap water in her house would stop running for days. What's more, Damara's high school

was closed until November because it lacked electricity.

Yet her family stayed put. They couldn't afford to move. And besides, Damara wanted to finish her senior year at her school. "I wanted to survive this in my home, not somewhere else," she says.

Damara's house didn't regain electricity until December 2017. And many of the city's streetlights still haven't gone back on.

It wasn't until February, Damara says, when most stores in her town reopened and things started to feel "normal" again. Today, like many other Puerto Ricans, she's still dealing with the emotional pain caused by the slow recovery.

"We are still angry," she says.

Leaving the Island

Many Puerto Ricans are fed up with the pace of the recovery and have fled the island in historic numbers. Some experts are concerned that

this mass **exodus** could further weaken Puerto Rico's economy.

"We will talk about pre- and post-Maria when we're talking about the history of Puerto Rico," says Luis Martínez-Fernández, a history professor at the University of Central Florida. "So many people are now desperate, leaving the island in larger numbers."

Martínez-Fernández says that many who left Puerto Rico went to New York City or central Florida, where they have relatives.

Derick and his family moved in with a cousin in Orlando. At the airport, they were greeted by workers from a disaster relief center set up by the state to help Puerto Ricans get settled. The aid workers helped enroll Derick and his sister in school.

"Coming to a place I don't know, I was very scared," Derick says. "But after I arrived at the airport, everything was so welcoming."

Starting Over

Just two days after Derick moved to Orlando in October, he started 11th grade. Like many students who arrived after the storm, he says the hardest part was jumping into a new school midyear, especially

because his classes in Puerto Rico had been taught in Spanish.

But Derick soon began to adjust. Last winter, his family moved to their own apartment in Orlando. His dad works in a Puerto Rican restaurant, and his mom found a job at a hotel. Derick joined his school's Latinos in Action club, which works to empower Latino students through community service and political activism.

Some Puerto Ricans who fled the island have since returned, but Derick and his family plan to stay on the mainland. He hopes to start college next year.

"This is like a dream," he says. "Sometimes to make it out of a situation alive and [for things to turn out] even better, you have to struggle first."

A Return to Normal?

In June, Derick visited Fajardo for the first time since last year. Some houses in his old neighborhood still had temporary roofs. But he was thrilled to spend time with his friends and family.

Now with another hurricane season underway, many people worry about what will happen to

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Puerto Rico is still in desperate need of aid nearly a year after Hurricane Maria. While it may be tempting to try to send food or clothes, experts say such items often go to waste. Consider donating money instead—even \$1. Below are three organizations helping relief efforts on the island. Find more at charitynavigator.org.

Hispanic Federation
hispanicfederation.org/unidos

Save the Children
savethechildren.org

United Way
unitedway.org/recovery

Puerto Rico and its already weakened power grid if another storm hits the island. FEMA has kept 3,000 federal employees in Puerto Rico just in case. The agency has also stockpiled water, food, tarps, and other supplies in four new warehouses across the island.

But Damara says all her focus is on going about her life as normally as possible. She recently started her first year in college in Puerto Rico, where she is studying microbiology.

"I hope another bad storm doesn't come," she says. "But that is not going to stop me." ♦

THE 51ST STATE?

Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory since it was acquired from Spain in the treaty that ended the Spanish-American War (1898).

Today, all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but residents of the island can't vote in presidential elections and have just one nonvoting representative in Congress. For decades, Puerto Rican activists and politicians have tried to change this by pushing to make Puerto Rico a state.

In June, Puerto Rico's congressional representative introduced a bill that would enable the territory to become a state by 2021. The bill faces an uphill battle in Congress.

Puerto Ricans who oppose statehood point out that they would then have to pay federal income tax. Some also fear the loss of the island's unique culture and identity.



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A home in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria struck last fall.

WRITE ABOUT IT!
Why might many Puerto Ricans feel angry about the federal government's response to Hurricane Maria?