

CAMPUS VOICES

Statehood doesn't matter: Puerto Rico is America



The Puerto Rican flag (right) flies in the wind. The country is struggling after hurricane Maria swept through earlier this month.

PHOTO BY OLIVIA RYAN



Olivia Ryan
Columnist

It is very likely that my grandparents and other extended family members are now homeless, but my family and I have no way of knowing for sure.

This summer, my parents and I had the privilege of traveling back to Puerto Rico for the first time in 14 years. We traveled across the island quite a bit during our short stay there, revisiting cities and landmarks I barely remembered seeing as a kid, but that my mother had seen throughout her whole childhood.

I remember the distraught look on my mother's face as we walked through downtown Ponce, a city on the southwest part of the island. Many of the stores we walked passed were empty, some with faded "for rent" signs in the window. The once beautiful plaza, home to the historic firehouse Las Bombas, was worn down, with only one of the two picturesque fountains still running. My mother remembered taking photos of my siblings and I at those fountains when we visited in the early 2000s. She remembered playing in them herself decades earlier.

The reality of Puerto Rico's debt crisis settled even more as we traveled to Villalba, the village my grandparents live in. My mother stared out the window silently as we drove through town. Some things in the village had changed since our last visit — there was a new Burger King, some stores had changed — but the more shocking part was how much had not changed.

Though we all read the headlines and understood the reality of poverty on the island, it didn't feel real until we walked the streets ourselves. Puerto Rico is not the island it once was, but now, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, its future is even more uncertain.

On Friday, the mayor of Villalba shared that around 70 percent of the houses in the village have been destroyed. The bridges in the area were torn down by the storm and there is no way in or out. The residents were told to evacuate before the storm, but we don't know where they were evacuated to.

At this point, we still have not been able to get in touch directly with my

grandparents and don't know where they are, but we know from extended family that everyone in my family is OK.

Many people have taken it upon themselves to turn this tragedy into an opportunity to debate Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory. While this is an important topic to discuss, that is not what the island needs right now. What is important right now is supporting Puerto Rico in whatever ways we can.

Puerto Ricans are American citizens. My mother and her parents, though born in Puerto Rico, still should be granted every right and privilege as other Americans. In this time of unfathomable need, we must support our people and come together as one nation. We must respond the same way we did in light of the hurricanes in Texas and Florida.

Puerto Rico and its people are strong and resilient, but they cannot take this hit on their own. We need to come together in support of those affected by this tragedy — not only those in United States territory, but also the other islands such as Dominica ravaged by

this storm.

The repair needed in the wake of hurricanes Harvey and Irma is immense, but the money and resources here in the United States are incomparable to those in Puerto Rico and islands similar. The entire island is without power and could remain that way for several months, there is barely any cell phone service, houses were demolished and a dam keeping water out is likely to overflow or break, which would essentially destroy that area.

I am lucky that my family is OK. We are lucky that my grandparents have five children and dozens of grandchildren in the United States whom they can stay with if necessary. But not every family on the island is as lucky as ours.

Look for ways to support Puerto Rico during this time. Donate to vetted organizations such as UNICEF, United for Puerto Rico or Students With Puerto Rico. Check in on any friends from Puerto Rico and ask about their families. Start conversations about this tragedy with friends or family members. Give any help you can.

How do we move forward in wake of natural disasters?



Hannah Benson
Columnist

WASTEFULNESS

3.9

If everyone lived like the average American, it would require 3.9 Earths to sustain the population

In under a month, three hurricanes have been making devastating landfall, threatening lives, displacing individuals and destroying infrastructure and economies. But, this is just the beginning. The West is burning, glaciers are melting and an iceberg broke off from Antarctica. Due to climate change, these natural events will increase in frequency and intensity.

It is time to start dealing with it. Asthma rates are increasing among children. Disease is spreading rapidly. Crops are dying due to drought and hot temperatures. Famine is widespread.

According to the report "The Price Tag of Being Young" by Nextgen Climate and Demos, the millennial generation will lose \$8.8 trillion in income, due to climate change. Climate change has a greater economic impact than any other economic challenge previous generations have faced.

This is more than an environmental problem. It's a public health and human rights issue. Individuals are already having to migrate because of food scarcity and water insecurity. This is exasperated by our rapid population growth, which adds stress to the already limited resources.

According to a BBC article, if everyone lived like the average American, it would require 3.9 earths to sustain the population. As a country, we are living far beyond our means, contributing greatly to greenhouse gas emissions, the increase in global temperature and the waste that is collecting in the oceans, and on shore.

We must become part of the solution to this catastrophic issue. Avoiding the problem is not an option. Climate change is happening and it will affect every individual in some way. Therefore it is our duty to fight against temperature rise and the increase of greenhouse gas emissions.

So how do we move forward?

First, we must recognize the problem and become educated about environmental issues. Elon offers many events on campus from speakers to classes focused in environmental studies. And you do not have to be an environmental studies major to learn more and get involved with the department at Elon University.

Second, we must recognize the things that we can change and can control. Do you drive further than you should? Do you air dry your clothes? Do you leave your lights on in your dorm? Everyone can reduce their energy consumption or greenhouse gas emission in one way. Eat less meat or carpool with someone home for Winter Break. Buy local food and turn off your lights when not in use. All simple steps that can be taken to reduce your overall greenhouse gas emissions.

Third, we must advocate for fair policies regarding carbon. Lobby for your hometown to sign onto Climate Mayors to show support in upholding the Paris Agreement efforts in their own city. Campaign for carbon pricing on a state and federal level. Show your representatives that you believe that a tax on carbon is the only fair way for companies to pay for the emissions they are creating and the dangerous living circumstances they are making for future generations.

We live in a climate that is changing. We live in a time where humans are causing that change. It's time for us to start taking responsibility for our actions. Future generations deserve an earth where they can go explore National Parks, walk to school without asthma attacks and live a life without fearing the next natural disaster. Become involved in whatever way you find appropriate, but remember the next generation is depending on us to leave the world better than we found it.