

NATIONAL

PUERTO RICO

ONE YEAR LATER

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



Damara Navarro outside a wrecked home in her hometown of Loíza, Puerto Rico, in August



A home in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria struck last fall

Derick Ortiz and Damara Navarro, both 17, grew up in northeastern Puerto Rico, about 25 miles from each other. But their lives began to head in different directions on the morning of September 20 of last year, when Puerto Rico was ravaged by one of the most powerful hurricanes ever recorded in the Atlantic Ocean—Hurricane Maria.

In the small, coastal city of Fajardo, Derick, his mom, dad, and younger sister lived without running water and electricity for three weeks after the storm wiped out power and nearly all cell service to the entire island and damaged about a third of all Puerto Rican homes. Derick's school and the hotel where both his parents worked were shut down.

In desperation, the Ortiz family decided in October to flee the only place they'd ever called home, bidding goodbye to their friends and relatives in Puerto Rico to start a new life in Orlando, Florida.

"I was literally crying," says Derick, "because I grew up with them and they were the only thing I had, and now I was



going to leave them behind."

Meanwhile, a 45-minute drive up the coast from where the Ortizes had lived, Damara remained in her hometown of Loíza, Puerto Rico, where she, her mom, and her grandmother struggled to regain normalcy.

"There were people who lost their rooftops, there were some who lost their whole house," says Damara. "It was chaos."

The fates of Derick's and Damara's families reflect the two paths Puerto Ricans took after Maria: staying on the island amid all the destruction or fleeing. About 200,000 Puerto Ricans (6 percent of Puerto Rico's pre-hurricane population of 3.3 million)

have left for the mainland United States since the storm, according to Puerto Rican government estimates. All Puerto Ricans are American citizens (*see "The 51st State?" p. 16*), but those who fled the island have had to start over in an unfamiliar place.

Those who stayed behind have faced a different struggle. One year later, major cities like San Juan have largely recovered from the storm, but thousands of homes across the island still don't have permanent roofs. Electricity wasn't restored to all of the island until last month, and power is still spotty in some areas, with frequent outages.

Nearly Bankrupt

Even before the hurricane, Puerto Rico had fallen on hard times. The U.S.

Many Puerto Ricans faced a difficult decision after Maria: Stay or go.

▶ Watch a video about a Puerto Rican teen's experience at UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

territory practically went bankrupt in the spring of 2017, and about half a million people had moved away over the past decade, seeking economic opportunities elsewhere.

Then Hurricane Maria made the situation even worse. More than 1,400 deaths occurred in the aftermath of the storm, according to the Puerto Rican government. A separate report by researchers from Harvard University this summer found that as many as 8,500 people may have died in Maria's wake, many of them because of delayed medical care—they were unable to get medicines, for example, or unable to get to hospitals because of poor road conditions.

The revelation that so many people may have died because of a lack of access to health care and other basic necessities has angered many Puerto Ricans who think the federal government didn't provide adequate aid to the island. They point out that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which handles relief efforts after natural disasters, was slow to get supplies to Puerto Rico after Maria. For example, FEMA delivered 5,000 blue tarps, which are used as temporary roofs, to Puerto Rico in the nine days after the storm hit. That's just a quarter

Damara had to live without electricity in her home for months.

of what FEMA provided to Houston in the nine days after it was ravaged by Hurricane Harvey last August. Many also complain that inexperienced contractors

were hired to rebuild the island's infrastructure.

In July, FEMA acknowledged that it had underestimated the devastation Maria would cause. 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."

Life After Maria

The lack of assistance forced many families, like Damara Navarro's, to live in crisis mode for months. While Damara's house sustained only leaks in the roof,

her town of Loíza was hit hard with floods and heavy winds that knocked out power to its 30,000 residents.

After the storm, Damara often had to wait in line at the gas station for several hours because so many people needed fuel for their generators. She had to buy ice every three days to keep the food in her home from spoiling. And sometimes the tap water in her house would stop running for days.

On top of that, Damara's school was closed until November because it didn't have electricity. But she stayed in Puerto Rico. Her family couldn't afford to move, but even if they could, she wanted to stay and finish senior year at her high school.

"I wanted to survive all this in my home, not somewhere else," she says.

Damara didn't get electricity back in her home until about three months after the storm hit. And, she says, it wasn't until February that most of the stores

The 51st State?

Hurricane Maria has reignited the statehood movement for Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico has been an American territory since 1898, when the U.S. acquired it from Spain in a treaty ending the Spanish-American War. Today, all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but only those living on the mainland enjoy full constitutional rights. Residents of Puerto Rico can't vote in presidential elections (though they can vote in primaries) and have one nonvoting representative in Congress. For decades, many Puerto Rican activists and politicians have tried to change this by

pushing to make Puerto Rico a state.

Now the federal government's slow response to Hurricane Maria has further fueled the call for statehood. In June, Jenniffer González-Colón, Puerto Rico's Congressional representative, introduced a bill that would enable the territory to become a state by 2021, telling reporters "this is about equality."

Although the bill has some bipartisan support, experts say it still faces an uphill battle in Congress, because many Republicans worry that a state

of Puerto Rico would elect Democrats to the Senate and House of Representatives.

In a 2017 referendum, 97 percent of Puerto Ricans voted in favor of statehood. But many anti-statehood political groups boycotted the referendum, and fewer than a quarter of eligible residents turned out to vote. Puerto Ricans who oppose statehood point out that they would have to pay federal income tax if Puerto Rico became a state. Some also fear the loss of the island's unique culture and identity.



The Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City

in her town began to reopen and things started feeling “normal” again. Today, she and many Puerto Ricans are still dealing with the emotional pain caused by the slow recovery.

“We are still angry,” Damara says.

A Mass Exodus

Many Puerto Ricans became fed up with the pace of the recovery, and they’ve 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. “The fact that so many people are now hopeless, desperate, leaving the island in larger numbers.”

According to Martínez-Fernández, many who left Puerto Rico went to New York City or central Florida, where there are large Puerto Rican communities and where those fleeing often have relatives. Derick Ortiz and his family moved in with his dad’s cousin in Orlando. When they arrived at the airport, the family was greeted by workers at a disaster relief center set up by the state to help Puerto Ricans get settled. They enrolled Derick and his sister in school and swapped his dad’s Puerto Rican driver’s license for a Florida one.

“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.”

Derick started 11th grade at Colonial High School two days later. Like many other students who came over after the storm, Derick says the hardest part was jumping into a new school mid-year, especially because in Puerto Rico his classes had been taught in Spanish.

But Derick soon began to adjust, and last winter, his family moved into their own two-bedroom apartment in Orlando.



“This is like a dream.”

—Derick Ortiz, 17, on his new life in Orlando, Florida

His mom found a job as a room service attendant at a hotel, and his dad works as a waiter in a Puerto Rican restaurant. At school, Derick joined the Latinos in Action club, which works to empower

Latino students through community service and political activism.

Although some Puerto Ricans who fled the island have since returned, Derick’s family plans to stay on

the mainland, where Derick hopes to attend college next year.

“This is like a dream,” he says. “It just goes to show sometimes to make it out alive of a situation and even better, you have to struggle first.”

A Return to Normal?

In June, Derick took a trip back to Fajardo for the first time since last year. Though some houses in his city still had temporary blue roofs, Derick

was overjoyed to spend time with friends and family back on the island.

“I thought they felt like I betrayed them,” he says. “But they took that feeling away.”

Now with another hurricane season under way, many worry about what will happen to Puerto Rico and its already-weakened power grid if another storm strikes. The power lines have been so tattered that the island could easily be plunged back into darkness. Just in case, FEMA has kept 3,000 federal employees in Puerto Rico and has 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 of 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.” •

What will happen if another strong hurricane strikes Puerto Rico?