Ivan Robles  
29 August 2019  
Summer grant field report

I expected that my summer research experience would be one of my biggest challenges yet, but I did not anticipate the amount of growth I would undergo during my time on the island of my roots. This summer I spent about seven weeks conducting research in San Juan, Puerto Rico as part of my thesis work. My project is focused on Hurricane Maria’s impact on community organizing in Puerto Rico, pairing qualitative interviews with existing quantitative data to demonstrate how disaster events transform and mobilize community groups.

I had the incredible privilege to interview over thirty community leaders, in addition to dozens of informal conversations with residents. Although the work of these individuals varied, they all shared goals of pushing Puerto Rico and its populace to recover from Maria and emerge even stronger than before. When I asked a member of the Brigada del Oeste, a group in western Puerto Rico promoting community self-management, to describe this work of grassroots recovery, they simply and powerfully replied: “Vamos a seguir la lucha y vamos a rescatar el país” (“We will continue the fight and we will rescue the country”). My research also brought me to New York City for a week, interviewing diaspora organizations and individuals to understand their role in disaster recovery from the mainland.

I also supported the work of La Corporación Proyecto ENLACE, a social-justice and environment-focused non-profit in the Caño Martín Peña area committed to collectively redeveloping its eight neighboring communities. This included a collaboration with a program dedicated to providing resources to the area’s injecting drug user population. This work allowed me to immerse myself in the community and build connections that positively impacted my thesis research.

In my conversations with community leaders in Puerto Rico, I was granted a glimpse of the interplay of turmoil and teamwork. Nearly two years later, Puerto Ricans are still confronted with the effects of the hurricane: families remain displaced, blue toldos still cover broken roofs, apagones regularly leave parts of the island in the dark, and everyday citizens continue to grapple with their trauma. However, the island and its pueblos have not remained stagnant. I witnessed communities responding to these issues with grants to support small businesses, protests calling for a state of emergency against gender-based violence, low-cost housing for displaced families, public eateries for students and those experiencing homelessness, and music and dance classes as a means of momentary escape. It is clear that Puerto Ricans have channeled their collective ire into action.

I look forward to continuing my research during my senior year and closely following the tense political situation in Puerto Rico. I am especially grateful to the support of the Center for International & Global Studies throughout this process. I will continue to rely on the Center’s mentorship to produce a thesis that is engaging, relevant, and impactful for Puerto Rico.