

Meet the Poughkeepsie student who repaired homes in Puerto Rico

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(Photo: Courtesy of SUNY New Paltz)

Amena-Devine Ruffin had never picked up a power tool.

She doesn't speak Spanish. She has a fear of heights.

But for two weeks in July, the 21-year-old Poughkeepsie resident used those tools, stood on top of buildings and learned to navigate a language barrier, as she helped repair three homes in Puerto Rico.

Ruffin traveled with 14 fellow SUNY New Paltz students and 14 others from throughout the SUNY system on a relief trip coordinated by the state to assist homes that remained damaged 10 months after Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria battered the island.

"She went over there and was taken out of her comfort zone," Ruffin's mother, Jacquetta Brown, said. "That's not something she would normally do but she wanted it because it was different and would make her uncomfortable. She told me 'If you're comfortable, how do you grow?'"

Although most of Puerto Rico has regained electricity and running water, some areas remain in need of aid. In the northern coast town of Catano, more than half of the population of 27,000 was left homeless in the days following the hurricanes, according to published reports.

It was there that Ruffin and other volunteers worked from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. most days, removing debris; power washing and drying ceilings; and using a grinder to open up cracks in walls and mixing cement to fill the cracks. With the rest of her time, she was free to explore the historic and cultural aspects of the island, and form relationships. Leaving Puerto Rico on July 28 proved an emotional departure, she said.

Ruffin learned about the program in class during the spring semester. She left her Poughkeepsie home on July 15.

'Our lives would never be the same'



Students from CUNY and SUNY helped repair homes in Puerto Rico from July 15-28. (Photo: Courtesy of SUNY New Paltz)

"When we landed, we were greeted by a man named Peter and he told us our lives would never be the same after this experience," Ruffin said. "After experiencing this, it's true. This experience was a long-term goal for me and I left shocked."

Ruffin, who will be a senior in the fall, is minoring in disaster studies. The curriculum focuses on how individuals, communities and the nation is affected by natural, technological and man-made events, according to the New Paltz website.

Ruffin said she found herself applying skills learned in the classroom to the real-life scenario of helping people after a natural disaster. She said she observed how people work through trauma, but wished she spoke Spanish to fully comprehend how the homeowners felt.

"We had a translator, but sometimes I felt the message got lost," Ruffin said. "I feel like I didn't get the whole picture but I tried to. Now, I definitely feel the need to pick up a second language."

The group of 29 students stayed in a dorm at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón in San Juan, around 30 minutes away from Catano.

They meditated on top of a roof

Every morning, Ruffin said her team leader held a meditation session for the group on the roof of the house on which they were working that day.

"After we meditated, we brainstormed as a team how we would accomplish our goals for the day," she said. "That's something I really appreciated because we all had a chance to offer something."

At the end of the workday, at 5:30 p.m., Ruffin met with other students from SUNY to share experiences from the day in a classroom-like setting — a requirement for the students to earn three credits from the college for the trip. Then students went off to dinner.

During her days off on Friday and Saturday, she tried to immerse herself in the culture by exploring Old San Juan, sampling the night life and trying food, like a native dish, mofongo, which features fried plantains.



Amena-Devine Ruffin poses for a photo with three Puerto Rico residents including the owner of the second home her group repaired, Jose. (Photo: Submitted by Amena-Devine Ruffin)

However, she said she spent most of her free time on the beach.

Ruffin said she and fellow volunteers were able to connect with residents through dinners and dancing, if not a common language.

"The commonality we all had was food, music and dancing," Ruffin said. "All humans, it doesn't matter what language you speak, can relate to each other on that these levels."

Days before returning home, she said her team cried at the thought of leaving the homeowners with whom they bonded. Ruffin said she plans to return after she graduates and already has an open visit invitation from the homeowner of the second house she worked on, Jose.

"One thing I'll never forget is Jose, who has so little yet he went to the store and bought food and prepared it for about 30 people," Ruffin said. "Even though I couldn't speak Spanish and he couldn't speak English, we tried our best to communicate our gratitude toward each other. His hospitality and warmness are something I'll never forget."

'We all left there better people'

The trip was a part of the New York Stands With Puerto Rico initiative, in which approximately 500 SUNY and CUNY students in various groups are assisting in the island's recovery.

In all, Ruffin's group of 29 students repaired five homes during the trip and worked on others. Ruffin was one of five disaster studies students on the trip, which was led by Amy Nitza, director at the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz.

"I'm really proud of Amena," Nitza said. "We all pushed ourselves to our limits physically and everybody did it with grace and good will. I hope we left the place better than we found it. I think we all left there better people than we were before."



Amena-Devine Ruffin joins SUNY New Paltz deployment to aid recovery effort in Puerto Rico. (Photo: Photo submitted by Amena-Devine Ruffin)

In addition to daily discussions, students were required to submit a daily journal, discussing their experience through a disaster psychology lens. A final academic paper is due on Aug. 11.

"This took the place of a regular disaster practicum course that (Ruffin) would get," Nitza said. "I think she got a lot more hands on experience out of this than she would have otherwise."

The United States Fund for UNICEF has supported the state initiative and paid for the students' meals, lodging and travel. In addition, the students will receive a \$500 stipend.

Though the trip is over, Ruffin's efforts to assist the community aren't over. Upon returning, she jumped into work for Voices of Tomorrow Empowered, an advocacy program in Poughkeepsie focused on helping young people become involved in the community.

"Puerto Rico still needs help," Ruffin said. "I'm going to do my part to spread awareness to children through the camp I'm working at. People should use their field of expertise and reach out to organizations in Puerto Rico to ask how they can be of service. Everyone should do their part."

Ryan Santistevan: rsantistev@poughkeepsiejournal.com; 845-437-4809; Twitter: @SantistevanRyan

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