

'Like Going Back in Time': Puerto Ricans Put Survival Skills to Use

Using generators, rationing and even bonfires, Puerto Ricans have had to get creative to survive weeks without power or regular water and food after Hurricane Maria.

By CAITLIN DICKERSON and LUIS FERRÉ-SADURNÍ OCT. 24, 2017

SAN JUAN, P.R. — A grandmother turned a school bathroom sink into a bath. Neighbors are piling into a garage for communal meals prepared on an old gas stove. A 79-year-old man made a bonfire out of fallen tree branches to cook.

More than a month after Hurricane Maria tore through Puerto Rico on a path of destruction that spared no region, race or class, residents of the island have found their creativity stretched to the limit as they try to function without many amenities of the modern world.

It is not just water and electricity that are in scarce supply. Cellphone service ranges from spotty to nonexistent. Cars are damaged and roads blocked. For many, work and school still have not resumed, so they wander the streets, play board games and sit around telling stories by candlelight.

"It's like going back in time," said Kevin Jose Sanchez Gonzalez, 25, who has been living in darkness since Sept. 5, the day before a previous storm, Hurricane Irma, began to chip away at Puerto Rico's electrical grid.

Crammed into homes three or four families at a time, living on canned and freeze-dried food without any means of turning it into a hot meal, and sleeping in shelters, Puerto Ricans have been learning to make do, sometimes in extreme ways.

A Home in a Tool Shed

As the sun set in the shantytown of La Perla in Old San Juan, Ramón Marrero, 79, slumped onto the unwashed cot inside his brother's tool shed, where he had lived since Maria claimed his home.

A single light bulb illuminated the other contents of the bare, musty room: two plastic chairs piled with clothes, canned fruit and vegetables, and a single gas burner.

Mr. Marrero, a community elder known to his neighbors as Don Ramón, draped a towel over his bare back to fend off the mosquitoes. Earlier, he had walked to the post office to charge his cellphone and mobile battery pack.

The only electricity he had seen since the storm came from an extension cord connected to a shared generator donated by Luis Fonsi, the Puerto Rican pop singer who filmed the video for the hit song "Despacito" in La Perla.

Mr. Marrero was hesitant to plug in the light bulb or his electric fan — only one could be used at a time — because he was afraid to overheat the machine or take energy from his neighbors.

Residents of the barrio say they were left to clear garbage and other debris on their own after the storm because municipal workers had failed to show up. Like Mr. Marrero, they were using fallen branches to fuel bonfires for cooking.

Lorel Cubano, the director of a local nonprofit, said most of the aid the neighborhood had received was from private citizens and celebrities like Mr. Fonsi. "The government hasn't arrived here," she said.

Fear in the Darkness

Georgia Lopez Ortiz, 92, is one of many elderly residents of the Luis Lloréns Torres housing project who have been too scared to walk outside since Maria wiped out the streetlights. The notoriously crime-ridden development is the largest in the Caribbean, and is dominated by rival gangs. Residents say it has become even more dangerous in the dark.

Ms. Ortiz's washing machine does not work, so she has been hand-washing clothes in a bucket. She cannot cook, so her daughters bring her food every few days.

When aid groups visit, she throws a rope through the security bars that enclose her patio, and uses it to pull up packages of water and dried goods.

Raquel Mercado, 69, lives in a cramped one-room apartment with her 37-year-old son. Her car has not worked since it was flooded during the storm, so she has not been able to get to a bank to withdraw cash or to a pharmacy to refill her prescriptions.

She is selling snacks out of her apartment to bring in some money.

"What else is there to do?" Ms. Mercado said. "We're stuck here."

Baseball, Wine and Long-term Guests

A baseball game blared from speakers connected to a projector screen in Maricarmen del Llano's living room. The adults drank red wine as they cleaned up from a dinner of fried chicken and mashed potatoes.

Even in the well-off parts of the island, though, life is not quite normal.

For the last month, seven extended family members, including a newborn, have been living with Ms. del Llano, a school psychologist; her husband, a veterinarian; and their two children, ages 7 and 9.

The whole house is running off a powerful generator. Overnight, they use the machine to run air-conditioning in each bedroom.

Tangie Sobrino, Ms. del Llano's cousin and the newborn's mother, is getting ready to move back home with her husband, a lawyer, and their two other young children. They were preparing to purchase a \$5,200 generator.

"Our reality is not the norm," Ms. Sobrino said, referring to the many Puerto Ricans for whom recovery was much further off.

From Good Life to Discomfort

The storm also revealed what had been carefully hidden cracks in the upper echelons of Puerto Rican society, which has been imploding during a decade-long recession.

Inside her two-story home with multiple balconies and a pool, Maria Julia Martinez's stainless-steel refrigerator, espresso machine and toaster oven have been gathering dust. The family's flooring business had tanked in recent years, and they could not use the appliances because they did not have \$2,000 to fix their broken generator in the backyard.

They have a much smaller generator that could support a couple of small appliances at a time, but to save gas money and prevent it from breaking down, the family runs the machine only at night. They use a propane camping stove and a barbecue to prepare food.

When Ms. Martinez's husband cranked on the small generator one night last week, she ran off to do a couple of laundry loads on the efficiency cycle. Afterward, the entire family, including their pets, went to sleep on mattresses set up on the floor of their upstairs master bedroom. A small air-conditioning unit in the room provided a respite from the rest of their home, which felt like a dark and steamy cave all day and night.

"This is living in hell," Ms. Martinez said. She acknowledged that despite their discomfort, her family was still much better off than most people on the island. "I feel bad for feeling bad."

A New Level of Poverty

Inside the elementary school classroom that has become their temporary home, Iris Perez and her two adult daughters sat in plastic chairs, slapping mosquitoes on their exposed arms and legs and staring blankly, as if it was too hot to speak.

Like nearly half of Puerto Ricans, they had been living in poverty before the storm. But Maria swept away their ocean-side home, and banished them to a new level of destitution.

This emergency shelter was better than the last; here there were showers and the family had the classroom to itself. Before, the women — along with Ms. Perez's brother, son-in-law, and two young granddaughters — had slept next to other families and bathed with cups of water, filled up in the bathroom sinks.

Hand-washed clothing hung from fluorescent lights on the ceiling. A bookshelf had become a medicine cabinet, with deodorant and baby shampoo stacked in front of school books. Filing cabinets were diaper changing stations.

Nashali Reyes, Ms. Perez's oldest daughter, was seven months pregnant, and worried about contracting the Zika virus. Her 2-year-old daughter Charyliz bobbed around the classroom with a blanket and bottle in her hands, seemingly unbothered by the bug bites on her face, which had become swollen and infected because she was allergic.

"It doesn't matter what we do," Ms. Reyes said, gesturing to a bottle of repellent. They had to keep the windows and doors open, they said, to maintain a livable, if extremely uncomfortable, temperature.

A message written on a whiteboard reminded them to keep their temporary home clean. "Welcome," it said in Spanish, "May God bless you."

Communal Living

Felix Cruz was holding court for his neighbors at a dining table in his garage. His home had been transformed into a motel and soup kitchen of sorts, because of his two extra bedrooms and large furniture, including a couple of sofa beds where people were crashing.

Most of the neighborhood's residents are retired and living on fixed incomes. They cook and eat communally using a 40-year-old gas stove that has been dragged out of storage and scraped clean of cockroach eggs and mold.

They have been cramming their food into a small freezer in Mr. Cruz's backyard, opening it as little as possible to preserve the cold air.

The neighbors pooled money to pay for gas to power a small generator that could support a couple of fans, and are eating two meals a day, usually rice and whatever meat is on sale.

They eat on fine china, even though doing dishes in the dark is a pain, to try to distract themselves from their discomfort.

"It was difficult before because food was expensive, electricity was expensive, and now it's even worse," Mr. Cruz said. He pointed to Alma Gonzalez, 67, one of the neighbors he said had become like family. "When she has money, she pays. When I have money, I pay. That's life."

Correction: October 24, 2017

An earlier version of this article contained an imprecise translation of a message at a shelter that was written in Spanish. The message said "May God bless you," not "God has blessed you."

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