

From Matt A:

Hello everyone, Thank you for being here today to celebrate the work that we have completed. This trip was truly life-changing in so many ways. I have been on many mission trips with a variety of people, but nothing has or will beat this trip and the group of people that I shared this experience with. I'm not going to lie, I was worried at first about how the trip would go for me being the youngest one there. I was going to miss a week of school (review week before finals) and had to call out "sick" from work for two days, was it really going to be worth it?

Arriving at our first job site was a little nerve racking; the roads had 90 degree angle turns and were clearly meant for one car only and our site manager informed us before we went that there was a feud going on between the house we were working at and the neighbors. Great, I'm going to die. Once we arrived, the home owners greeted us excitedly. Since I worked on those horrible doors all day, I spent most of my time inside the house. The aunt and the daughter spent a good part of their day sitting on their couch, watching us and talking to us. Whether it was about their 11 cats or how they survived the hurricane, they were so eager and excited to tell us everything. Even though they didn't speak the best English and we didn't speak the best Spanish, they persisted on finding a way around the language barrier to talk with us. I could probably tell you their whole life story. The aunt even cooked a delicious lunch for us both days.

In Ponce, a two hour drive from Luquillo, after being rained out from the job site and that deathly roof, we stopped at a gas station to unpack and eat lunch. During the middle of our lunch, a man pulls his car right up next to us and gets out. He knows we are not from Puerto Rico and asks us where we are from. After learning we are from the mainland of the United States, he starts talking to us like we are friends who haven't seen each other in a while. He tells us about when he was in the army and when he lived in the mainland United States. He goes on for about twenty minutes and then realizes he is late for picking up his grandson from school. He leaves us by blessing us for the work that we are doing. He never even entered the gas station to get whatever he came there to get.

This happened again on our last day in Ponce, at the same gas station. We are eating lunch, when someone notices Rendy talking to this guy in his car. After a few minutes, Rendy comes back and told us that this man was giving him suggestions on where we must go to see the best views in Puerto Rico. He really wanted us to go to these places and see the beauty of Puerto Rico. We fantasized about going to those places for a few minutes but then realized that time was not on our side.

On the last day in San Juan, my mom and I were walking alongside the port when we came across this man selling what looked like paintings on wood. He was wearing a "Make Puerto Rico Great Again" hat that mocked the MAGA hats. We approached him to see the works that he made. The paintings were first carved into the wood by fire and then painted over. The wood was all recycled debris from the hurricane. The man informed us how this is what he did for a living and joked about how his wife scolded him from giving up his "real job" to do this. I notice one piece that has Puerto Rico painted on it in the colors of their flag. He tells us about his

life and how he ended up where he was: born in the United States to a Puerto Rican mom and American dad. He was made fun of for being half Puerto Rican. He moved to Puerto Rico after retirement and then was made fun of again for being half American. He was either known as a Gringo or a Spik. Then he said in an almost begging way that he really hoped OUR government would step up and help out Puerto Rico because they really needed it. Puerto Rico is really struggling.

On our t-shirts the quote reads, "If you don't have a dollar to give, you STILL have your time, your focus, and your voice. Be generous." We gave our money. We gave our time. We gave our focus. Now we need to give our voices. Will the end of this trip be the end of our time and focus? I hope that it is just the start of it. We owe it to the amazing people that we encountered down there, the generous, loving, kind, desperate,

hopeful people of Puerto Rico to use our voices for them. Telling my stories today is only a start, and I hope it is not the end. I hope you have heard my message today, how generous and wonderful the people of Puerto Rico are, and will tell the same message to your friends and family. I hope you and me will continue to spread this message to everyone around us, for days, weeks, months, and years to come. The more we use our voices and the more voices we have, the more time and focus we contribute, the more power and persuasion we will have. The more of a difference we can make.

So yes, it was worth it. I met some of the nicest people I will ever meet on this trip, I had experiences that have changed my view on life, and the camaraderie between us all made the trip even more special. I would do this again in a heartbeat.

Thank you!