

Following the mission trip to Puerto Rico. I have spent a lot of time reading about Puerto Rico and learning about the aftermath of the 2017 hurricane season. I find that now when I talk about the mission trip I tell people more about the effects the hurricanes had on the islanders than the great work we actually did while we were there. I want to share with them the story of the plight of the people of Puerto Rico following Maria. When I explained a lot of what I was reading and learning to my wife Jean one night, I talked non-stop for about an hour. There is no way I can fit it all into a reflection designed to last a few minutes. If you would like to hear more. Feel free to track me down.

As many of you know I am associated with the Hartland boy scout troop. The final requirement each scout must face in order to earn the rank of eagle scout is to sit for a board of review. During this time the board may ask the scout any question they want pertaining to their career in scouts. One of my favorite questions they ask is for the scout to describe his scouting experience in one word and then explain why they chose that word. Some of the words and the reasonings behind them are astounding.

I want to share with you some words I associate with the trip and the reasonings behind them.

Apprehensive, hesitant and unsure. – The rest of my family has been on multiple mission trips and those were my first thoughts when it was suggested that I attend this trip. Weeks went by and while I was still on the fence worrying about who would plow and take care of the cats and chickens while we were gone, my wife went ahead and confirmed me as a YES for the trip. Thank you so much Jean. It now seems so crazy to me that I hesitated for even a second.

Devastation, Catastrophic, apocalyptic - words that were used in the media to describe the island after receiving a direct hit from Hurricane Maria.

Alienated, forgotten, alone and abandoned - Many Puerto Ricans have these feelings toward the United States Government and its citizens following the delayed and poorly coordinated and executed relief efforts.

Reality –We didn't see the devastation. Most of the debris was cleaned up. The island was green once again. Reality of the storm hit me as we traveled to the first work site on the first day. As we came around a corner on the highway there was a wind farm with about 20 towers. Not a single tower was spinning. Most of the towers didn't have a single fin or blade on them. For those few which had blades ...the blades were shredded beyond repair. Our car was silent as we stared at the destruction and drove by.

Wonder – As I said, upon returning, I read a lot about Puerto Rico and the aftermath of the 2017 hurricane season. I wanted to know more about why a young girl at my first work site was living in a room which had a huge hole open to the outside. This huge hole was a result of where the winds from Maria had started to tear the roof from the house almost a year and a half ago. I wanted to know why it took 11 months for the last neighborhood in the mountains near Ponce to regain electricity. 11 months without electricity... think about how miserable we feel when we lose power for 3 days. I wanted to better understand why a man was mocking me and making fun of me for being a tourist when we went out for dinner one night at the local kiosks. I wanted to know why more wasn't being done for the people of Puerto Rico who are still clearly struggling and are extremely impoverished.

Impoverished – Puerto Rico itself is 74 billion dollars in debt.

45% of the population of Puerto Rico lives below the poverty level. In the continental US that rate is 12%

The unemployment rate is 14% while here it is 4%.

The median income in Puerto Rico is \$19,000. The poorest state in the continental US is Mississippi at \$38,000. Puerto Rico is just about half of our poorest state.

60% of the youth in Puerto Rico do not finish 10th grade.

Because they are not a state they are not required to pay federal taxes. Since they do not pay those taxes they are not eligible for the Affordable Care Act for health benefits. Therefore 60% of the population are on Medicare or Medicaid.

Enchanting – The sounds of the tropical island at night. The endless chorus of the Coqui (co-kee) tree frogs was amazing.

Temptation – One night a group of us went on a kayak night tour of Bio-bay. This bay thrives with bioluminescent microorganisms. As we swept our paddles and hands through the water the organisms gave off an incredible glow. As a person who studied marine biology and has an innate love for the water it was so hard to resist the temptation to jump in and swim in the bay.

Frustration – the feeling I had when trying to hang a door requiring us to drill into reinforced concrete walls where nothing was plumb, level or square. Eventually we hung the door and fortunately none of the members of the household were short because we ended up hanging it upside down and the handle was quite high.

Grateful – The word the women who lived in the house at our first site used when we were saying goodbye after our group installed a new roof and fixed a door to the bathroom which would not close and therefore offered no privacy.

Infectious – The laughter of Lucia Jackson.

When we gathered for vespers following the 4th workday in Puerto Rico I asked each person to sum up their Puerto Rico mission trip in one word and explain their thought process. For example my word was ecstatic. For some reason that is a really hard word for me to say so I'm not entirely sure why I chose that word other than it is a more complicated word for thrilled. I was thrilled to be on my first mission trip. I was thrilled to be doing the work we were doing. I was thrilled to know that we were making improvements to peoples living conditions. And, I was thrill to be able to call everyone on the mission trip my friend.

It is important to note that those words spoken that night were the words that came to mind at that particular moment and time. Words could easily have been different at any other time on the trip or even at this point following reflection. I'm not going to share the reasonings for why these words were used or who's word it was at that time. But I would like to share those words with you. If everyone could close their eyes and listen to these words. Just imaging the meanings behind them.

Gratitude, service, comfort, welcomed, hectic, blessed, humbling, resilient, heroic, togetherness, delight, healing, unexpected, privileged, flexibility, bond, liberating, beauty, chaotic, hopeful, pride, legacy, love

Those 24 words are the words you will find on the cover of your bulletin.

As far as the man who was mocking me at the kiosks for being a US tourist. In rapid Spanish and hand motions he called me over to join his group. I timidly went over. He wanted to know how much longer I would be on the island. Through a translator in his group I explained that we were the United Churches of Hartland, Vermont. We were on the beautiful island he called home, to repair and replace roofs damaged during Hurricane Maria. His posture, demeanor and voice immediately changed. He jumped up, took my hand in his and shook it and with a twinkle in his eye said “god bless you, god bless you.”