

Living: The People We Met Deb Yerkes

Here at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church we talk about our mission of Living, Learning and Loving. I would like to share what the 11 of us who traveled to Puerto Rico to work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) realized about living on this island following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria on Sept. 20, 2017.

As we flew in, the first impression was the blue tarp-dotted landscape near San Juan, a sign that repair work was still required. We worked to seal six different roofs and each person - Carmen, Grace, Paula, Johnny Murial. . . Diane had a different, yet similar story. We could tell each story, but over and over again they tell of a people who have kept their faith in one another, in their resilience, and in a God that goes with them daily.



In her eighties, Carmen lived alone in a house where her parents had also once lived. She had been flooded out during the hurricane and required a secure roof before additional help was to be provided. We arrived on Monday, knowing fully that her chemo treatment was scheduled for Tuesday. We wanted to be done that day.

Walking through Carmen's simple home, one could see that furniture was pieced together. The front room had assorted lawn furniture for seating. The buffet and cabinets were obviously not original or built in, but looked to be "found" pieces that worked for now. Displayed along the back wall of the kitchen were pieces of pottery and vases you could tell were treasured, and possibly original to the room. As we moved into the backyard, remnants of other buildings filled the space as the chickens roamed through the overgrown vegetation. We climbed the steps to meet our first flat roof.

Later, as Carmen fed us beans, rice and chicken with tomatoes and lettuce (grown in her backyard), she showed us photos of the hurricane's aftermath. The interior had been swept by muddy flood waters from the nearby river. She had lived with one daughter for two months and another for four months as they tried to clear her home of layers of mud and debris left in the wake of the flooding, yet unable to make significant progress until power was restored on Day 97. Showing us photos of the devastation, we understood the impact and the total loss of all things dear, Carmen spoke repeatedly of the furniture which had been her parents' that was destroyed, and of her multiple sewing machines, her source of income as a seamstress, each destroyed. She was currently using a borrowed machine to earn money on alterations.

The roof itself was a mess. Water sat in puddles and oozed from under the paint layer which had not been adequately blown off. It was our first roof and we worked to understand the task and do it properly.

Coordination was critical. No matter how planned, one had to be prepared for conditions being different than expected. Living conditions were deemed "makeshift." People who had been fairly comfortable prior to the hurricane were no longer that way. Trauma of losing everything coupled with the destruction made the entire recovery process drag. This was obvious in their stories, but in each case, there was family and/or community that provided hope and sustenance. St. Vincent DePaul Charities was critical to the success of the PDA efforts and proved the need for multiple denominations working together.

No matter how long the electricity had failed them or the walls molded as they awaited help, their patience, strength and courage endured. In like fashion, our strength as a team from Woodlawn Chapel grew as we lived together and worked to make a difference. We are thankful that our church believes in living as a community, modeled by the many we met on this mission and Christ's example, and we are thankful for your generous support on behalf of the lives we worked to impact.

