

Puerto Rico's Hurricane Maria provides ethnic studies lesson

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Credit: University of Oregon

When UO ethnic studies associate professor Alaí Reyes-Santos flipped on the late-night news on September 19, 2017, she saw something she'd been dreading since childhood: a category four hurricane was barreling toward Puerto Rico from the southeast.

"My mother always warned me that if a hurricane started in the southeast and curved up, it would wipe out the entire island," remembers Reyes-

Santos, a native Puerto Rican who hails from a small town in the Cordillera Central mountain range.

Reyes-Santos stared in horror at the screen, transfixed by the arc of Maria's storm graphics spiraling from sea to the country's southeastern shore.

"There was nothing I could do from thousands of miles away, I felt powerless," she recalled recently from her small office on the outskirts of the UO campus.

However, Reyes-Santos proved to be anything but powerless. Responding to perhaps the worst natural disaster on record to hit the Caribbean island and its neighbors, she rallied local Puerto Ricans and others to provide crucial support.

An op-ed column from Eugene's Register-Guard is posted on the wall behind her desk. A headline stretches across the top of the page: "Why Oregon Should Care about Puerto Rico." The piece is dated September 28, 2017, a mere eight days after the storm hit. And the byline belongs to Reyes-Santos.

Federal aid had sputtered to the devastated archipelago, and her piece ignited a flurry of contact from fellow Puerto Ricans in the Pacific Northwest.

The group quickly banded together to coordinate relief efforts. They collected supplies: nonperishable food, bottles of water, tarps, first aid kits, and mosquito repellent, and jammed them into a plane. They held fundraisers where Reyes-Santos teamed up with other researchers from across the state to educate crowds about the distinctly challenging circumstances faced by the pummeled region. They also worked with Oregon representative Diego Hernandez, an ethnic studies alumnus, to

push the column into the hands of public officials, and the Oregon magazine *Revista Caminos* translated it into Spanish to expand its reach.



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"The outpouring of support said a lot about Puerto Ricans and how we rally for our community—no matter where we are in the world," she says.

One geographic hub of support was the UO campus in Eugene. Her students were eager to get involved.

Reyes-Santos gave them a way through her Race, Ethics, Justice course,

the enrollment of which surged that fall, which she attributes to students wanting to respond more directly to heightened political, social, and racial tension, and to violence in the country.

"They wanted to make an impact outside of the classroom," she says.

Their hunger inspired Reyes-Santos to scrap her original curriculum and rework it to focus on the response to Hurricane Maria. Reyes-Santos had begun to hear from folks still on the island and the reports were grim. People were waiting in lines for hours in scorching heat, just to get a single bottle of water. Food was being rationed amid widespread uncertainty about access to supplies. And friends were sleeping on roofs to escape sweltering living spaces, as power outages persisted for weeks.

In what she saw as the federal government's neglect for [vulnerable groups](#) in Puerto Rico, Reyes-Santos found evidence of the issues she examines in ethnic studies.

"A humanitarian crisis was unfolding on Puerto Rico, and my students were examining the intersection of race, ethics, and justice in a classroom at the UO," Reyes-Santos says. "There was an opportunity to empower them to make a difference around these issues in Puerto Rico."

She decided to turn the course into a humanities-based intervention, in which students examined disparities in justice through the lens of Hurricane Maria and created educational resources for the public about disenfranchised communities enduring a natural disaster. Their materials were published online—the UO Puerto Rico Project: Hurricane Maria and Its Aftermath.



UO ethnic studies associate professor Alaí Reyes-Santos. Credit: University of Oregon

One group of students pursued an especially immersive project: they embarked on a field trip to Puerto Rico in November 2017, because Reyes-Santos was feeling pulled back home and knew visiting the island could provide an invaluable educational opportunity.

"I realized I had to get back home, to see and feel what was happening on the ground," she says.

Their excursion to the Caribbean allowed students to deliver 12 suitcases worth of supplies—and to make firsthand observations about the injustices Puerto Ricans were experiencing in the wake of the hurricane. They conducted interviews and assembled audio, photographic, and written documentation for the Puerto Rico Project website, to raise public awareness.

Reyes-Santos says the experience pushed her to shift her approach to teaching and research.

"I was very inspired by the students and their work," she says. "Students really want to use their expertise and talent to help."

Her next research project will focus on water resources in rural areas and communities of color in Oregon. As she considers how factors such as [climate change](#) and income disparities disproportionately affect different groups and their access to water, she'll make students an integral part of her work.

"I learned that if we harness students' hunger to engage in social justice work," Reyes-Santos says, "we can empower them to make a real difference in communities around the world."

More information: UO Puerto Rico Project:
blogs.uoregon.edu/theuopuertoricoproject/

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