



# Servicio en la Isla del Encanto

Spring 2022

## Essential Questions:

- Why do many people consider Puerto Rico as the forgotten territory of the USA?
- How do Puerto Ricans still face reconstructions from Hurricane Maria?
- What must be done to help?

## Community Partnerships:



## Description:

Located approximately 1,000 miles southeast of Miami, Fla., Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island and unincorporated territory of the United States.

The blend of Spanish, Indian, and African influences gives Puerto Rico an international charm. It is easy to see why it attracts millions of visitors and is called "The Island of Enchantment" by locals. Not only does the country offer historical sites to visit. It is also home to beautiful beaches and lush rainforests.

After arriving in Puerto Rico, students will help on home building projects in the community of Villa del Rio. Two days before returning home, they will also take part in a Sustainable Forestry Project led by Tropic Ventures.

Needless to say, students will also encounter fun activities such as a tour of El Morro and Old San Juan and a kayaking adventure at Bioluminescence Bay.



# Fun with Presentations & Second Grade

By: Morgan J. '23

March 2, 2022

We started today off with a bang with the small individual research presentations we were assigned. There were a variety of different topics, including specifics from the history, culture, government, economy, and natural wonders of Puerto Rico. Each presentation was amazing in its own right, as well as informative, entertaining, and aesthetically pleasing to the eye. That took up most of our morning, with the rest of the time filled with an excerpt from *When I Was Puerto Rican: A Memoir*, which talked about the childhood of Esmeralda Santiago, the author of the book. We had a very lively conversation about the metaphorical meaning of guavas, which was very interesting to say the least. This helped us gain insight on the island from a native who was born and grew up on Puerto Rico. After a short break, we headed off to Mrs. Vincent's 2nd-grade classroom, where we spent around 30 minutes with our ECS buddies, teaching them about our ECS. We taught them about the meaning of community service, gave them a short geography lesson on where Puerto Rico is, listened to the sounds of different animals on the island with them, and helped them make their own Puerto Rican flags out of construction paper. It was a very eventful 30 minutes, and the 2nd graders, who were about 10 years younger than all of us, kept us very entertained. We then got an early dismissal to pack and rest for our long (and early) journey tomorrow.





# Red Eyes Make Kids Cry

By: Tristan T. '23

March 3, 2022

To start off the Puerto Rico journey, everyone met at the front of the Trianon at the reasonable hour of 1:00 in the morning. As we loaded our bags and ourselves on the bus, we groggily headed to DIA for our first of two flights. At the airport, the early hour caused some of us to lose our common sense; one of us struggled to put on the check-in bag tag as we all laughed in a sleep-deprived daze. Unfortunately, having the last boarding group and Southwest being open seating, most of us had to sit in the middle seat between two strangers. The humbling, uncomfortable experience was the talk among us as we finally landed in Tampa after the grueling three-and-a-half-hour flight. The layover was only 45 minutes, so most of us grabbed a bite to eat at PDQ's before loading up on an even more unfortunate plane situation. Though we had a better boarding group, we watched with a grimace as four hysterically crying babies headed onto the plane. On our flight from Tampa to Puerto Rico, we luckily got to sit next to our friends. We happily endured the crying babies as we landed on the Enchanted Isle. We eagerly got our bags as our skin began to get clammy from the humidity and tried to figure out how to exit the airport. We were greeted excitedly by the Global Works guide Randall as we all got on a bus to arrive at the Big Yellow House. We were given the introduction to the rules of the house and ate a nice meal after a long day. After dinner, all of us got ready for bed to prepare for a fun, long day in the city of Old San Juan.





# Old San Juan

By: Leksi E. '23

March 4, 2022

We wake up bright and early at 7:00 AM to a delicious breakfast of eggs, hash browns, and sausage. Everyone eats and hastily gets dressed and ready to get on the bus. After about an hour-long ride along the highway filled with singing, laughing, and general chatter we arrive in the city of Old San Juan. Our tour guide introduces himself and prepares us for the long day ahead; there will be lots of “sun and shade” he says, referring to the many hours we were to spend walking. We first take a look at some of the buildings, churches, museums, and statues, lots of “firsts” he says, like the first governor of Puerto Rico, the first fort, the first church... we see a few more interesting places around town, listening intently to his extensive descriptions of the history of San Juan and Puerto Rico itself. We toured one of the forts on the ocean, venturing up and down too many flights of stairs to count as we all looked out windows or down cannon barrels in wonder. We stop for some helado on the way to lunch, because the sun has gotten hot and the sweat is visibly glistening on all our foreheads. A chorus of oo’s and mm’s erupts as we try our different flavors of ice cream. We arrive at our restaurant and eat a delicious lunch filled with an array of options, chicken and pork with rice, beans, salad, or one of the many forms of cooked plantains.







# Conserving Endangered Trees

By: Carissa L. '23

March 5, 2022

We started our third day on the Enchanted Island bright and early at 7:00 a.m., the loud cries of the roosters making sure we were up and ready. We were provided a delicious morning breakfast of waffles, sausage, ham, and eggs. Everyone briskly got ready for a long, windy, 2-hour drive into the rainforest. When we finally arrived at the Tropic Ventures Sustainable Forestry Research and Education Center, we were greeted by dogs, goats, beautiful tropical plants, and 3T, a researcher, and survivor of Hurricane Maria. The night before, we had watched a video on Youtube that was recorded during the hurricane. We could feel the heartbreaking experience through the screen, and I was even worried while watching it.

In the rainforest, we quickly put on our gloves and began working. Everyone took to clearing ferns that were overtaking trees and killing them. There were three endangered native trees; in fact, 3T said that there were only 300 left in the world. The purpose of the research is to conserve these rare trees and to study them in their natural habitat. By the end of our service day, we had cleared a huge area, and it was surprising how much we did in just a few hours. We made a huge contribution and saved many trees by removing the ferns.

On our way home, the bus, unfortunately, broke down, and we were stranded on the side of the road in the middle of the rainforest. We had to wait a few hours for a new bus to come to get us, which gave us an opportunity to visit a few local gift shops in the town closest to us. When we finally got home, we were exhausted. We ate dinner and headed to bed by 10:00 p.m.





# Building Foundations

By: Chloe P. '23

March 6, 2022

We began our fourth day of service in Puerto Rico with a later start for our second service location of the trip around 9:00 a.m., enjoying a briefer bus ride than those of our previous mornings. Enjoying the local scenery of our neighborhood, we arrived at Villa Del Rio on time and commenced with instructions and introductions.

Our goal for this day of work was to help build the foundations of an addition-to-be through digging holes, transporting, and laying out the rebar skeleton of the structure. On location, it was overwhelmingly natural for the entire group of us to be integrated into the community. Of course, this was made easy by the unending gratitude, kindness, and welcoming nature of Anna Marie, her family, and the crew who worked tirelessly along with us. The sense of sentimentality in the community's disposition definitely touched each and every one of us in the group, with conversations between individuals leaving a lasting impression – on both parties, hopefully. As the day went on, and more progress was made on the additional units of the house, it became clear that what we were doing was not only a service project for high school students and offer meager support to the families at hand, but that the work being done was adding to a community larger than us, larger than itself, and larger than any materialistic tendencies. Absent of any negative takeaways, this first day of service at Villa Del Rio served to introduce to us, as a group, what it means to partake in meaningful service.

Following the conclusion of a long day's work, we boarded the bus to return to the Big Yellow House and headed off to the beach for some well-deserved leisure time with each other. Ending the day with another culture-heavy meal for dinner, we all reflected on our day of service as a group, each of us detailing our individual takeaways from the day.



# Rebar & Mud Balls

By: River V. '23

March 7, 2022



On our fifth day of service in Puerto Rico, we continued to help build foundations and layout rebar skeleton structures in Villa del Rio. While the entire group worked tirelessly to get the job done the two boys, Brian and Abraham, asked constantly for us to play with them. We finally gave in and during one of our longer breaks after lunch, we took an old plastic baseball bat and made mud balls to pitch to the boys. It was amazing to see the smiles on their faces as they slammed the mudballs. Everyone joined in and took turns hitting home runs into the jungle. Everyone, including the boys, took turns pitching so everyone could take a swing. Eventually, the adults gave in and began taking swings at the mudballs. This was the break that everyone needed as the beating sun beat down on our burnt backs.



After our refreshing break, we got back to helping the community and building the rebar skeletons as the boys continued to throw up a mud ball and them with the old plastic bat. I think the biggest takeaway from the experiences today is to never take for granted what you have because you can always have fun with an old broken plastic bat and a few mudballs and good friends.





# A Room for 2 Brothers

By: Diego A. '23

March 8, 2022

On our last day helping in Villa del Rio, everyone worked together in order to achieve our goal for the day: to build the foundation of the four pillars that are going to support a new room for the two little boys of the family, Brian and Abraham.

Today, William and Angel, the local workers who are in charge of the new room that we were building, showed us how to work with cement. We learned everything we needed to know in order to create solid concrete. The mix was a cart full of rocks, four buckets of water, two bags of cement mix, and a cart full of sand. We divided into multiple groups to make the best job possible. One group was in charge of shoveling rocks and sand into the carts and bringing it to the cement mixer, another one shoveled the concrete mix into the buckets, and the last group was a huge line of people passing the buckets halfway full of concrete to the hole we had dug the past two days. We did great work and were able to fill all four holes. After a couple of hours, we finished, and everyone was exhausted. All of our clothes were covered in concrete. We are going to have fun trying to clean that!



Today was a shorter day than usual, but we worked harder, better, and quicker. After we achieved our goal for the day, we headed up to Maria's house to eat some delicious food. They thanked us for these three days of hard work and said goodbye... or that is what we thought; instead, they showed up at The Big Yellow House to join us for dinner! Even though not everyone knows Spanish and some others do not know English, we had a great time.



# Clearing a Path

By: Henry G. '22

March 9, 2022

Today was our first day working with a part of a local group called Ecosol, with two volunteers, Ramon and Carlos. Ecosol is a group that came together and fought against the governor, who was trying to build two large resorts, for an area of land and won in 2013 to make the land into a nature conservation area. In 2017 they came back together to begin restoration to the area for eco-tourism. The land used to be filled with sugarcane, and there were massive sugar cane plantations in the area. Later, the land became a cattle ranch and dairy farm. This group is working to transform the land and old buildings, and they are not funded by the government, which makes volunteers that much more important. After learning a little more about the land, we began to do what we came there to do: volunteer work. We had a small walk to our work site through a beautiful, lush jungle. Ramon showed us a path they had been working on that passes by some old silos and a spot where after the sugar mills were torn down, the cattle lived. Following Ramon and Carlos, who had gas-powered weed-whackers, we used large clippers to clip the small trees and used our hands to clean up all the debris. The goal of the day was to go down the path they had already created and widen it to around four or 5 feet. We went around a fourth of a mile clearing the path, and we were proud of the work we did. The path was beginning to take shape!







# The Service Finale

By: Sasha M. '22

March 10, 2022



Today was our final day of community service. Around 9 a.m., we packed into a small, yellow bus to return to Luquillo, eager to finish our project with Ecosol. Once we arrived, we split into two groups: one cleared more of the jungle trail, and the other made space for a future rest stop for hikers and people working at the sea turtle nesting ground. Most of the work consisted of trimming trees and vines to clear new pathways. This project is particularly exciting to me because we are the first group to work on the trails in the conservation area. At the end of the day, we had the opportunity to discuss a variety of topics with Carlos, one of the conservationists who helped us work on the site. The subjects ranged from the politics of Puerto Rico's territory status and the numerous monumental feminists that make up the history on the island to the biology of El Yunque National Forest. Personally, I found all of it fascinating, but I was most excited to hear about the important women who have influenced Puerto Rico (especially because it was International Women's Day yesterday). On our hour-and-a-half drive back to the Big Yellow House, I had time to reflect on my service experience on the island. This ECS has been so meaningful and has reminded me of the value of hard work and the importance of community. Overall, today was bittersweet knowing that all of our hard work has come to a close.





# Back in Old San Juan

By: James H. '22

March 11, 2022

Our first day of the last, more relaxed, leg of the trip... We were treated to an extra hour of sleep, before a brief breakfast, before shipping out to the old city. Our bus took us to the roundabout in front of the entrance to El Morro. Half of us walked a few blocks to purchase kites while the others held our spot in the beautiful open grass area set between the city streets and the old military fort. For the next two hours, our group got to relax and take in the ocean breezes on the grassy hill, staring out to the sea. A few of us flew kites while the others just chatted. I rolled down the hill a number of times. Our guide brought out our lunch – a lovely picnic made up of a variety of cheeses, crackers, and quesitos. As soon as the food came out, we were harassed by a flock of pigeons and grackles. After gathering our things, we walked up the hill to the Museo de las Americas. There, we toured four exciting exhibits that displayed Puerto Rico's African heritage, struggle through conquest, rich art and theater culture, and so much more. After a brief visit to the gift shop, we were off once more, but this time to a dance studio that centered around Bomba. All of the girls donned skirts, and we watched in awe as our instructor gave us a quick introduction to the popular rhythms in Bomba. She then began instructing us on a few simple steps and routines. Most of our group was shy, but a few of us stepped up and performed the solo dances we learned in front of the group. Bomba is incredibly interesting because, in almost all dances, the dancer adheres to the music, but in Bomba, the lead drummer is playing in accordance with what the leading woman dancer is doing. After a few photos, the teachers treated all of us to well-deserved refreshments for all of our dancing. We then returned to the Big Yellow House for our last dinner there. It was so nice to just relax and spend a few hours in the old city since our previous week had been rather grueling in service work. The museum illustrated much of the history we had been sporadically told about throughout the trip, and I personally found the art exhibit to be incredibly interesting. Bomba was a great way to get our bodies moving and a super interesting insight into a culture most of us knew nothing about. I can tell many of us are getting homesick, but I can certainly say I am going to miss the Big Yellow House. It has been our home for the past nine days, and it has been so good to us. Today has certainly been the slower pace we all needed, and I am going to enjoy spending one last night in the Big Yellow House before we take off tomorrow morning.





# Mofongo Madness

By: Graham B. '22

March 12, 2022

After our last discussion at the Big Yellow House, we packed our bags and headed out to Luquillo – our last destination in Puerto Rico. Our lunches in Puerto Rico have been nothing short of traditional and delicious; today we were able to dive into a rich Mofongo dish consisting of a mashed fried green plantain mixed with traditional spices, garlic, and pork rinds. Most of us came to the agreement that this meal was one of the best we have had, as the cake-like Mofongo paved the way for Zak T.'s 18th birthday at Casa Coral.

Tall modern hotels line our new home's neighborhood, and the sound of crashing waves reminds us of the wonderful memories we have made on this Enchanted Island. As aforementioned, Luquillo is lined with fancy hotels and roaring waves, compared to the soft waves and traditional houses of Cerro Gordo. We can tell that this side of Puerto Rico is much more developed and invested in than our last resting spot, and that applies to our guesthouse as well. For instance, a wide-open patio allowed for an exciting celebration for Zak's birthday. The twins, Grayson and Henry, are living life in their queen suite, while the rest of us are enjoying each others' company from our comfortable bunk beds. As we prepare for a relaxing day of paddle-boarding and nighttime kayaking in a nearby bioluminescent bay, none of us are ready to leave this warm, biting bug-filled, and humid climate, for our wintry home in Colorado.