

# BEYOND BLUE TARPS: BUILDING STRENGTH WITHIN

## COMMUNITY RESTORATION: CHANGE BEGINS WITH A STRONG COMMUNITY

### COMMUNITY RECOVERY

This was my first visit to US territory, Puerto Rico. When landed, I was greeted by a fellow Oregon State student and Puerto Rican native, of whom I had never met before. The warm welcome received consisted of a cozy bed and a fresh cup of Puerto Rican coffee upon my eyes opening, inside the home they had left after Hurricane Maria in 2017.



Sisters: OSU Graduate Student, Rahiza de Thomas and Puerto Rico resident, Professor Estefania de Thomas

Their firsthand accounts of the trauma experienced during the deadliest US based natural disaster in the last 100 years could not be imagined with each story being told, 2,975 residents were killed. Hurricane Maria left \$90 billion in damages of which Congress allocated at least \$63 billion for disaster relief and recovery operations. After four years, 71 percent of those funds have not reached communities on the island. In fact, Puerto Rico has only received about \$18 billion. The stories told were of desperation and fear. I listened to the havoc the storm brought, which left the island without communication for four weeks, unable to talk to family members across the island. The island was without water and electricity for over a year. These are the memories of the surviving that still haunt residents four years after the storm. Witnessing the reminders of the destruction, with many homes still covered with blue tarps, yet to be fixed. We also had to arrange for fresh water to be picked up due to water shortages still being experienced today.



Early morning walk through Aguadilla neighborhood.



Other stories shared were of the constant power outages from the decimated antiquated electric grid and the series of destructive earthquakes, only adding to the torment of the little progress towards fixing Puerto Rico.

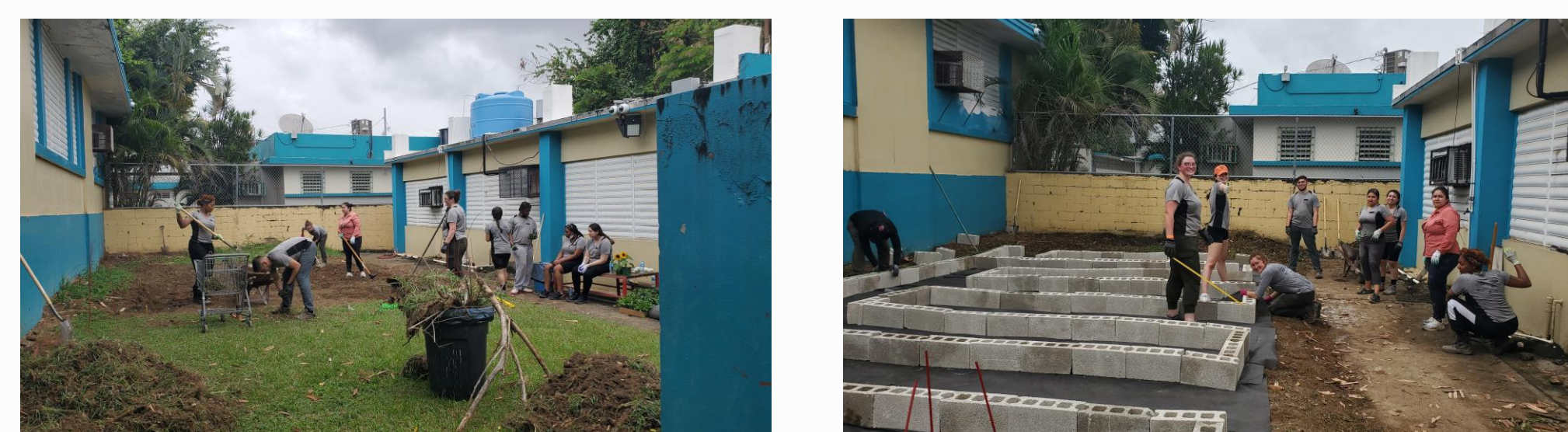
Painted on the front of the Caguas Highschool is the mural referenced above. It was created by the 2019 graduating class, leaving their mark to served as a reminder by telling future generations that everything is possible when a community works together.

### CAGUAS HIGHSCHOOL

However, despite the hardships, the main story I heard that resonated throughout the trip was one of strength, hope, and resilience. The communities within were strong, proud, and were filled with nothing but smiles. College and highschool students from Oregon arrived at Caguas Highschool and were met by staff, administrators, and even Caguas students to collaborated on building raised garden bed, in efforts of taken back their education, shaping it the way they wanted.



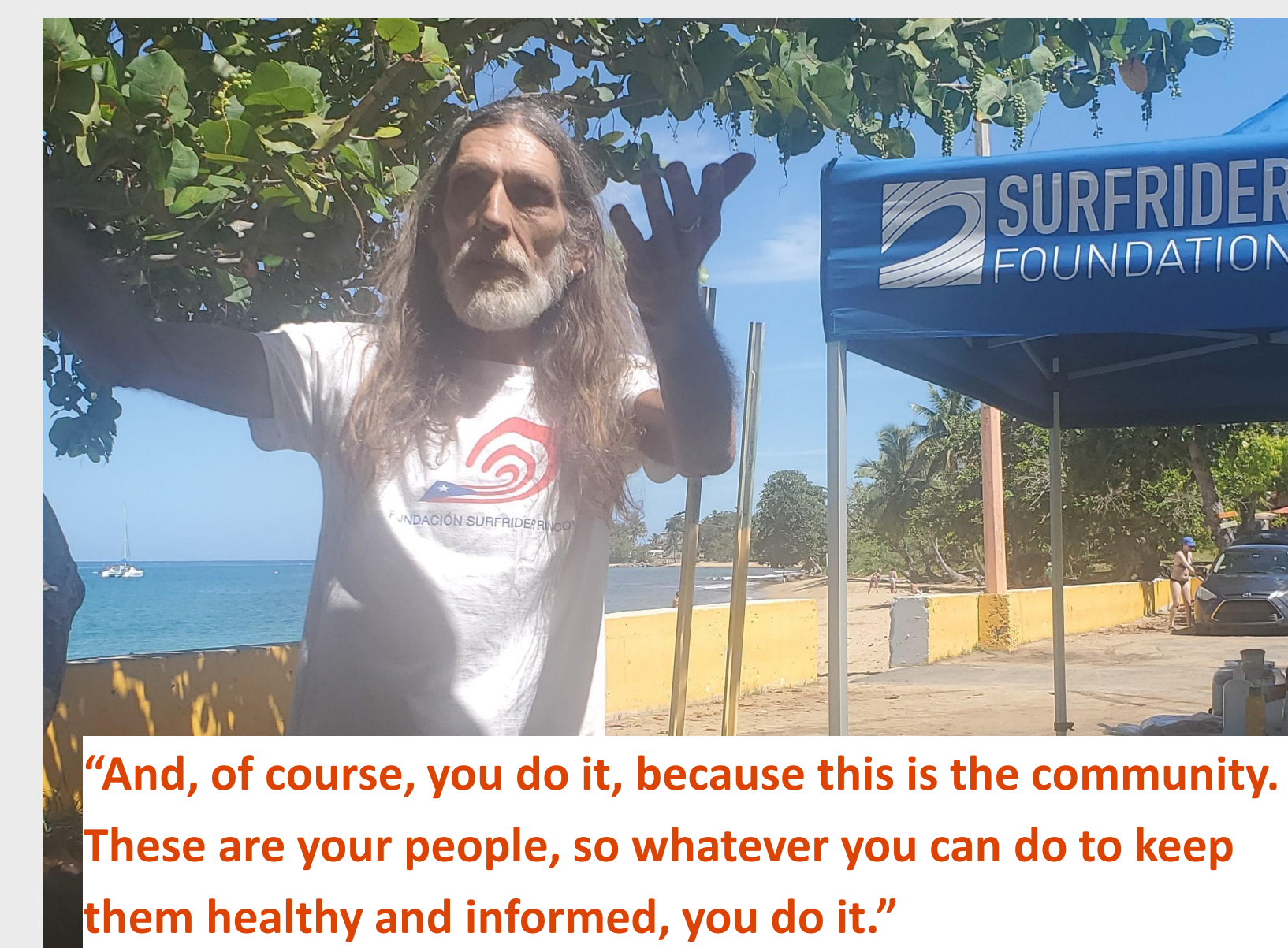
Working together as a team for 14 hours, we used each other's strengths in creating raised garden beds with irrigation, plants, lighting, and a composting system.



Project Leaders:(left to right) Venecia Rollins, Rahiza de Thomas, Olivia Schmidt, and Elizabeth Lopez

*"As we invest in upgrading and modernizing our American infrastructure system, we have to make sure that we do it everywhere, in every community," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand*

### BEACH CLEAN-UP



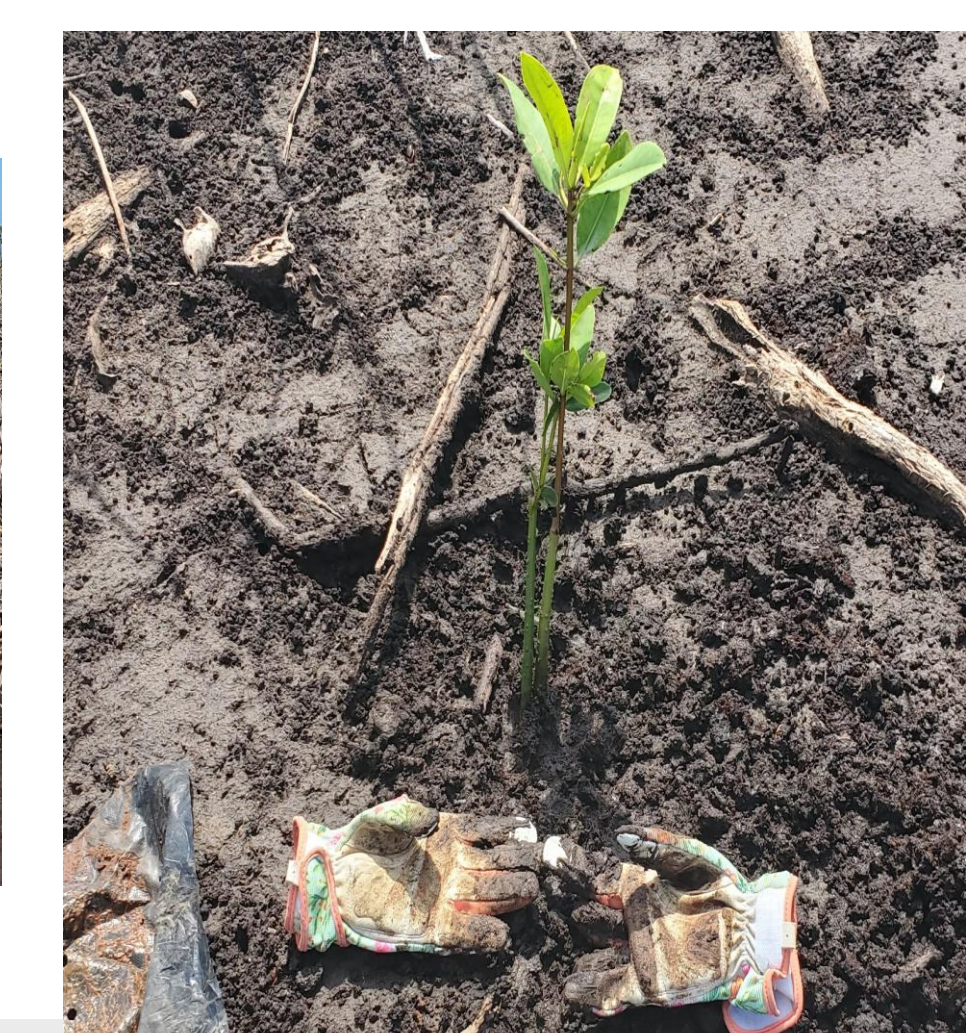
Steve Tamar who leads Surfrider's Blue Water Task Force water testing program in Rincón.

*"And, of course, you do it, because this is the community. These are your people, so whatever you can do to keep them healthy and informed, you do it."*

After the storm hit, people were relying on mostly untested sources of water to meet their bathing, drinking and household needs, but the Rincón Chapter was able to adjust their beach water testing methodology to provide basic information on the safety of several heavily-used, community sources of freshwater. An afternoon as volunteers beach clean up, on Rincón beach and testing water samples in their lab, we learned of the continual efforts of improving the coastal communities.

### MANGROVES PROJECT

The health of our oceans during climate change depends on the key role of mangroves living in our coastal communities. Collaborating with UPR, highschool, undergraduate, and graduate students from Oregon, we spent the day securing new mangrove plants in the decimated environment left after Hurricane Maria.



### Reflection

The community in which we live has a great influence on our lives. Comfortable, stable communities significantly improve the quality of our lives. Strong communities often have accessible parks and greenspaces, quality education programs, safe housing, clean water and all the everyday comforts we so often take for granted. Strong communities make us better as a whole. Creating and strengthening our community requires courageous leadership, clear communication, connection to our environment, and opportunities for motivating and engaging the people that reside within. The Puerto Rico experience exemplified that leadership comes in all ages and backgrounds while flexibility and understanding were key to collaborating a multitude of personalities and skill sets. The key take away is we all have the ability to make a difference! Strong communities don't just develop overnight – they take time, concentrated effort, positivity, and planning.

*"Go often to the house of thy friend, for weeds choke the unused path." - Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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