

# Building Food Security in a Resilient Community



## La Escuela Especializada en Tecnología Gerardo Sellés Solá, Caguas, Puerto Rico

The Taino people were ones who knew how to work the land well. Agriculture was one of their many skills. They developed agricultural systems that were easily maintained and environmentally friendly. Many of the people of Puerto Rico today hold DNA similar to the Taino yet due to enslavement, colonization, and disease, many skills were unable to be passed down through generations. As seen with catastrophic events, agriculture is a skill that is much needed in modern day Puerto Rico. We had the opportunity to build a garden in an empty lot behind this local high school in Caguas, Puerto Rico.

Though this wasn't my first time constructing a garden, it was my first time constructing one at a high school. I identify with many of the struggles that are seen amongst the people of Puerto Rico. I come from a diverse lineage who was both stripped of their native languages and skills. Growing up in the underserved communities of Cleveland, OH, food insecurity was and still is very common. I lived a majority of my life in a food desert and am well aware of the benefits of having an edible garden. This was my most valuable experience during our service-learning trip because it was the most fulfilling. Building community gardens and teaching my community about growing their own food and developing nutritious eating habits is a part of my long list of career goals.

Uplifting and strengthening the Black community of the United States is my number one goal in life. We have suffered and still suffer from many environmental injustices and my work in Puerto Rico has taught me valuable lessons that fall in line with my goals. It showed me the importance of communication and teamwork. Without the two, things can become very strenuous. This project has also showed me how important willpower is. We built this garden on a hot, humid day and I found my willpower to push through when I reminded myself of the importance of our project and all the possibilities in what we're leaving behind. Though teamwork was very important in building this garden, the most important thing was everyone knowing their role and knowing when to lead and when to follow. Knowing how to listen and when to listen is my greatest skill and it helped me immensely through this journey.

Once the project was complete, we were all satisfied with what we created. I would have loved to add a breadfruit tree and a few other fruit trees in the extra space on the lot. This would have been great additions to diminishing food security, enhancing the garden, and it would have provided adequate shade (once it was full grown). Next steps would be teaching the students and faculty (if there is no previous knowledge) how to grow and harvest plants. It will be a great learning experience for all. Another thing that should be done is teaching nutrition and the value in eating more plant-based foods. This is something that is necessary in food insecure communities because when you're eating to survive, thoughts of nutritional benefits/concerns are distant.

## There is Power in Fear

In 2015, Shonda Rhimes, a screenwriting mogul, wrote a book titled *Year of Yes* where she decided to do what she wanted regardless of her insecurities, fears, and anxieties. 2022 is my year of yes. I was very nervous to leave the country and travel with a bunch of people I didn't know. I had multiple excuses as to why I couldn't or shouldn't go such as finances, time restraints, work, etc. Wanda Crannell did her best to give me less reasons to say no and I am thankful for her.

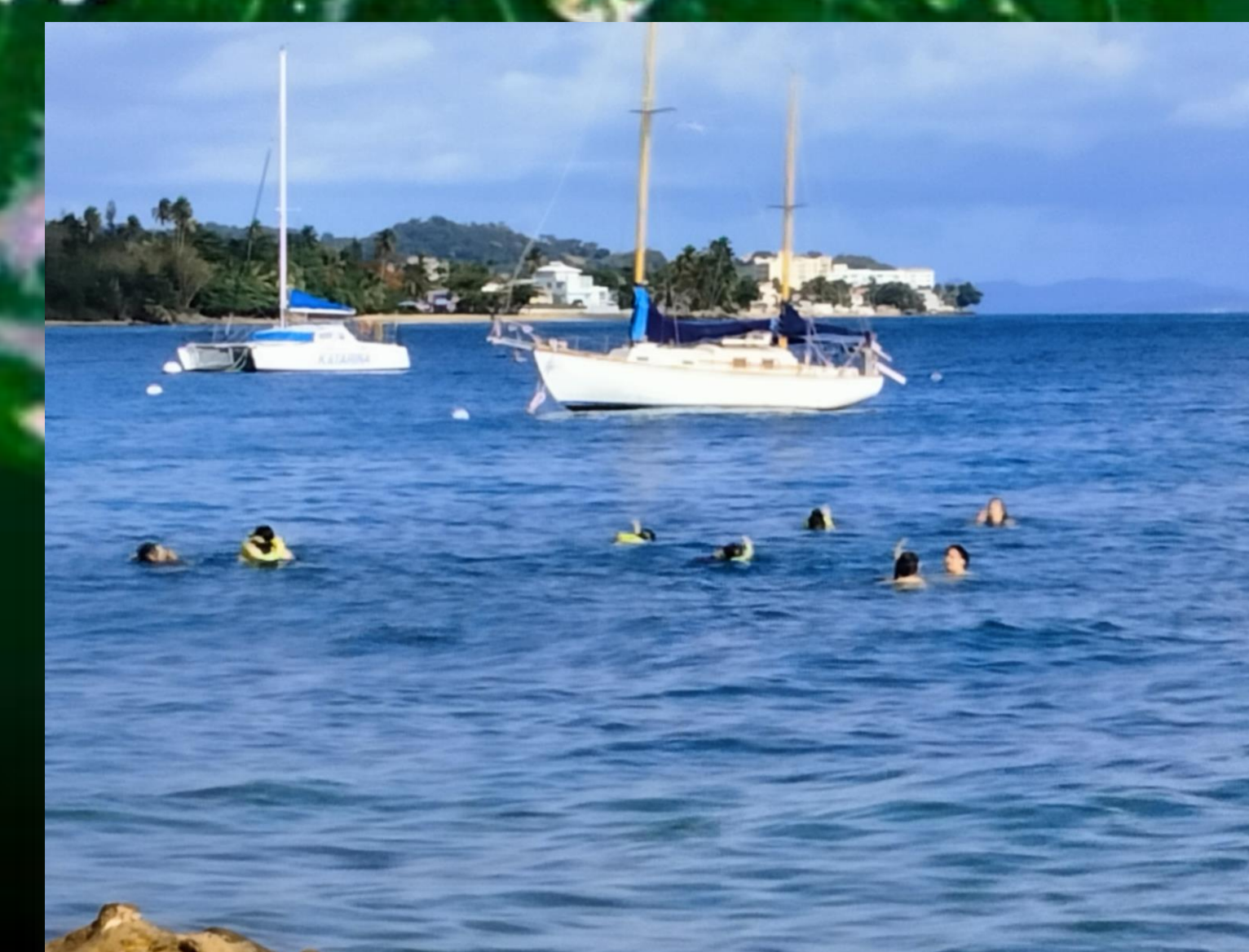
What I learned most on this trip were interpersonal and personal skills. Because the trip was short, I had to do certain things quicker such as relationship development with strangers which made collaborating and communication easier. Because I am not used to being around others for long periods of time, this also allowed me the opportunity to learn to set aside personal time for myself to regroup and reflect. Had I not done this, it would have been an extremely stressful trip since being surrounded by people is overwhelming for me.

While in Puerto Rico, I also allowed myself to be fearless. I did things that would normally cause me anxiety. For example, I am terrified of deep, open water (I still am) but I decided to go snorkeling and it was a very powerful experience for me. I saw that by permitting myself to do this minimized a fear; strengthened my confidence and felt empowered. This experience also allowed me to know the amount of patience it takes to encourage and empower others in conquering their fears.

Overall, being able to connect with another culture and seeing the benefits of my labor has given me the drive I need to push through this era of my life. As a "non-traditional" student who is double majoring in Ecological Engineering and Natural Resources, balancing multiple jobs, and keeping up with my many responsibilities, discouragement has been plentiful these past two years in Oregon. Participating in this trip has reminded me of my future goals and why it's necessary that I am in school right now. I am extremely thankful to everyone who has helped me get here and the people who continue to support me on this journey. Sometimes it feels impossible, but I conquer my fear everyday I wake up and decide to go to class.

## Other Trip Highlights:

- Seeing all of the wild food harvests
- Trying mofongo (it's delicious and amazing)
- Planting mangroves and losing the sole of my boot in the mud
- Going kayaking on the Bioluminescent Bay
- Getting to know my new friends
- Jumping off a pier into the ocean
- Floating in saltwater
- Cleaning trash on the beach



## Special Thank To:

Dr. Ricardo Mata-González & Paul Dorres  
 ER Jackman  
 CAS Global Experience Fund  
 Dra. Sharnha Vázquez  
 Prof. Estefania D. De Thomas  
 Prof. José Reyes  
 Escuela Especialidad en Tecnología Gerardo Sellés Solá  
 Dr. Ricardo J. Colón-Rivera, PhD  
 Edgardo González, MS  
 Dr. Edly Santiago, University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez  
 Dr. Grizelle Gonzalez  
 USDA IITF  
 Wanda Crannell

