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My experience in participating in the SUNY 2019 service trip to Puerto Rico is hard to put into words. I say this because it was the most enlightening experiences of my life. This experience gave me insight, new skills, a sense of compassion, and fulfilling friendships. Not only did I meet fellow students and quickly befriend them, the natives of Puerto Rico have found a place in my heart that is irreplaceable.

Getting on the plane on the morning of July 14th, I felt nervous. I was nervous to miss my flight, nervous of something going wrong, nervous about the people who I would be spending the next two weeks of my life with. This was a new experience for me. Never before have I stepped out of my comfort zone like this. I was on board with strangers ready to enter a foreign place to do work I have never done before. I am lucky I didn't listen to the doubtful voice in my head that said, "this is not for you" and "maybe I am making a mistake". I am proud of myself for taking the leap, and getting on that plane. Never before have I had roommates. I can proudly say that I loved having roommates. We woke up together, got ready together, and went to work together. I truly would never expect to have gotten as close as I did with my roommates, in such a short matter of time. By day 2, it was as if we had known each other for years. This wasn't just for my roommates, this was for everybody in my cohort. A group of 19 students and two weeks. It took 2 days to become extremely close and great friends. I think it was because of the reason we were in Puerto Rico that had a tremendous effect on the compatibility of our group. This reason was to help, to volunteer our time to improve the lives of strangers. Nothing could prepare me for the immense enlightenment and satisfaction that came with a group of students helping those who needed help the most. I am different in comparison to the girl who walked on that plane with doubt. I am different from the girl who never participated in building a home for somebody who lost their home in a natural disaster. I am different from the girl who was there to consult the people whose government had failed to. It was an experience to be in Puerto Rico as the governor resigned. We got to be apart of the movement and participate in protests side by side with native people. I am cultured now with a new appreciation for the natives of Puerto Rico. I was not prepared to fall in love with the culture of this Island. For this, I am eternally grateful as this is what has made me grow. Since returning from my journey, I am more patient, more kind, more well-rounded, and extremely ready to get hands on and assist somebody in need.

I was ignorant before my experience. I was in the dark to all the suffering the beautiful small island had endured. Being there seeing the destruction, poverty, and the failed government has made me aware of the ignorance my past life had contained. These are the symptoms for most people. As my friends said, "you are in another country"; I can now feel angry by this statement as the ignorance blossoms through so many people's minds.

Before my experience, I was on the same level of ignorance. Being a SUNY student, I opted to receive college credit for the trip. In order to receive college credit, a series of reading were assigned and reflections each day. The readings discussed were incredibly influential and helped my viewpoint expand. People don't view Puerto Rico as part of the United States. As stated in the readings, people view the people in Puerto Rico only good for two things; reproduction and working. It is incredibly sad to think of a person in such an inhumane way,

especially one that is part of the same country. Our media projects this onto their viewers in a way to brainwash people and to keep ignorance alive. This is proven in the reading with references to "West Side Story". Ignorance exists and Puerto Rico has suffered because of this. Our media shows Puerto Ricans to be poor, and dirty people. In reality, the island of Puerto Rico is humble. People are kind, humble, and hard working as they fight to reverse the damage that has been done physically and mentally. It is because of this experience that I was lucky enough to see beyond the stereotypes and ignorance. First hand, I was working with the native people. The people have made me beyond blessed to have had the opportunity to explore their island and get an insider's point of view. If the people living outside Puerto Rico were as humble as the Puerto Ricans are, all would be healed in the central United States. I can only hope that our media and our people will accept Puerto Rico. I can only wish an experience like mine upon everybody to help demolish the ignorance. I am lucky to have been assigned reflections. This has allowed me to each day record the work I did, the people I met, what I learned and how I felt throughout the day. I recommend anybody taking part of a service trip to record everything in a reflection journal.

Never before have I done any type of construction work. And I must say, I appreciate the people who get up every day and work in construction. The work is difficult. The work is strenuous. However, the work is rewarding. While building homes there is a level of satisfaction that no money could ever buy. Have you ever nailed a roof into place so a family will be safe? Have you ever measured and cut wood to build a foundation of a home? Have you ever lifted such heavy material that you need three people to lift up the material? Have you ever used extreme power tools? Have you ever thought the work was too physically hard and then get yourself motivated enough to push through? I can go on and on. The work was hard but more rewarding in pros than cons. Two weeks of physical labor was strenuous, because of this I have a new appreciation of what really goes on behind the scenes of construction. Often in times we only see the finished product and we are all ignorant in the amount of mental and physical work that needs to be done to get a job finished correctly. I watched the work ethics of the men and women of Puerto Rico, it is admirable. Not once in two weeks did I see anybody give up or get frustrated, this includes my fellow students. I also have a newfound appreciation for safety risks on the job site. It is amazing how alert and aware the people working were. They communicate with each other and this is what keeps everybody safe. The significant challenges for me was simply that I am not in great physical shape. There were a lot of tasks I could not complete on my own. Towards the beginning this was extremely discouraging. By the end of the trip, the discouragement was gone. I truly learned the value of only doing what your body can handle and not overdoing it for safety purposes. I struggled with anxiety and I was worried the professionals on the site were going to judge me and think I was weak because I couldn't lift the sheet of metal or that I needed help using basic tools. By the end of the second day I learned this is not the case. The workers took us in as apprentices and taught us. They taught us with no grief, and no hesitation. It is admirable that professionals were willing to take time out of their work day to help teach us a new skill and share their culture with us.

Before Puerto Rico, I was a regular college student; working toward a degree and taking regular college classes. Because of this experience I was able to step outside my comfort zone and learn skills, gain new friends, and more knowledge than I could ever ask for. Thank you Heart 9/11 for taking us in, thank you to SUNY purchase for this opportunity. I am blessed that

my college, Nassau Community College referred me to be apart of this learning trip. Because of Puerto Rico, Heart 9/11, and SUNY purchase, 19 students became family as have grown together. My only hope is to continue to travel and volunteer abroad and to one day return to Orocovis, Puerto Rico.