

Pace Student Documentary Highlights the Suffering in Puerto Rico

By Anna Young

A group of Pace University student filmmakers will have the chance to watch their work on the silver screen next week as they premiere their documentary film project at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville.

The students' film, "Puerto Rico: Hope in the Dark," depicts the devastating impact Hurricane Maria left in its path six months after the storm slammed into the island. The two-hour documentary, which will be screened at the Burns on May 1, will share stories of the Puerto Rican people's strength, hope and resilience as they continue to restore their lives and homes.

For the past 15 years, Pace Professor Maria Luskay has led students on exploratory one-week trips as part of her Producing the Documentary course at the Pleasantville campus. Students have traveled to the Florida Everglades, Cuba, Belize, Portugal, Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica and The Netherlands documenting important stories that need to be told, Luskay said.

While her course teaches students the conception, production and editing of a documentary, she said her experiential class allows its participants to take in other cultures and provide them unique opportunities.

"Students are learning in the field and experiencing another culture, another world, outside of their classroom," Luskay said. "They learn the value and importance of teamwork and organization as well as how to solve problems and adapt to changes in the story as it develops."

After several weeks of research and preparation, the 18-student class started the journey in Miami last month interviewing a meteorologist and a professor of anthropology. Once they touched down in San Juan, the students spent the week traveling to 14 locations throughout the island, interviewing more than 60 people.

Students said they interviewed several residents along with officials from the Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA), the Hispanic Federation, Habitat for Humanity, social service agencies, Con Edison, the Puerto Rican government and others about the challenges of restoring normalcy to the island.

"The point of this documentary is to give a voice to the people who went through the hurricane," senior Adina McCray said. "We hear all this news coverage, but we didn't hear from the
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The group of student filmmakers from Pace University who worked on and produced "Puerto Rico: Hope in the Dark," which will be screened next Tuesday at the Jacob Burns Film Center.



Max Vuolle, Matt Martinez, Blake Rozelle and Devin Stafford, four of the 18 students from Pace who traveled to Puerto Rico to create a documentary showing the plight of the island and its people since Hurricane Maria last September.

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people. So, we wanted to get on-the-ground stories.”

While there was relatively minor impact to San Juan, students said the conditions progressively worsened as they traveled to the outskirts of Puerto Rico.

Senior Kelly Whritenour said despite debris being cleaned up in Humacao, the city is still a mess.

“Entire houses were just washed into the sea and that was heart-wrenching, but that was the story I knew we were there to get,” she said. “It’s a positive thing that we’re telling this story, but what about these people? Why is it still like this in Humacao?”

Sophomore Blake Rozelle said he saw a house that collapsed off the mountainside when he traveled to Utuado.

“These people can never go back, all their stuff is laying right there and it’s almost as if it’s forgotten, like nobody cares about it,” Rozelle said. “That’s the

upsetting part.”

“It’s hard to quantify human suffering on that level,” graduate student Gabriel Rivera added.

Rivera said the trip was particularly emotional for him because he had family living on the island who were impacted by the storm. Throughout filming, Rivera got to see his relatives, which he said was an overwhelming experience.

“I was just so happy to be there. It’s something that really meant a lot to me,” Rivera said. “Besides what I learned from the production standpoint and working on a film, it was an incredibly rewarding experience.”

Now that students have completed their six-week post-production period, they said they’re eager to showcase their film to family, friends and the public next Tuesday at the Jacob Burns Film Center.

“People need to pay attention to this story, so I’m excited to finally get it out there because this is still a problem,”

Whritenour said. “For me, all I really wanted to do with this doc was to do right by the people that we interviewed. We don’t want to play it down, I really want to tell their story.”

While Rivera is anxious for his family to see the film, he hopes the documentary motivates viewers to help the people of Puerto Rico.

“If we help one person, that made the experience totally gratifying for me,” he said.

“Puerto Rico: Hope in the Dark” will be screened on May 1 at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville at 7 p.m. It will also be shown at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace’s lower Manhattan campus on Monday, May 7. Tickets are \$9 for film center members and \$14 for non-members.

To purchase tickets, visit www.burnsfilmcenter.org or www.pace.edu/dyson/news-and-events/pacedoc-hope-in-the-dark.

