

Pace Students Film Documentary in Puerto Rico



L to R: (back row) Rachel Skopp-Cardillo, Nick Aquilino, John Watson, Max Vuolle, Gabriel Rivera, Seoyoung Hong, Dr. Maria Luskay, Matt Martinez, Devin Stafford, Blake Rozelle, Joseph Gonzalez, Christian Arriaga-Flores Aime Rodriguez, (font row) Felicia Robcke, Gabriela Corey, Kelly Whritenour, Carmen Ballon, Adiba Sikder, Adina McCray and Francy Rios Germosen.

As the roof ripped off the orphanage at the La Milagrosa in Humacao, Puerto Rico, nuns played games with the children to distract them from the terror outside. Six months after Hurricane Maria, Pace University students witnessed what remained of the now abandoned orphanage. The only thing left standing in the girls' dormitory was a small plaster statue of Saint Raphael perched on a shelf.

It was one of the many sights Pace University students witnessed as they traveled the island during a week-long trip over spring break to document Puerto Rico's devastation and recovery for a film to be screened May 1 and 7 in Pleasantville and New York City.

Led by Maria Luskay, a professor in the Department of Media, Communications and Visual Arts at Pace's Pleasantville campus, the 18 students interviewed more than 60 people in 11 locations from the rainforests to coastal and mountain villages to the City of San Juan.

"Going to Puerto Rico has left an everlasting impact on my life," said student Rachel Skopp-Cardillo. "I was lucky enough to see Con Edison turn on power for an elementary school that hadn't had electricity since Hurricane Irma. I will never forget the smiles, tears, and cheers of the children. They were so grateful to have light again in their school."

For the past 15 years, Luskay has led students on such trips as part of her Producing the Documentary course at Pace. Last year, students traveled to the Florida Everglades and the year before, to Cuba as the island was first opened to Americans.

Luskay said the class is not just about learning how to make a documentary film, but experiencing other cultures that expand horizons for students.

learning in the field and experiencing another culture, another world, outside of their classroom," said Luskay. "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."

The students started their journey in Miami interviewing a meteorologist and Jorge Duany, professor of anthropology at Florida International University and author of "Everything You Need to Know about Puerto Rico." Once in Puerto Rico they interviewed not only residents, but officials from FEMA, social service agencies, the Puerto Rican government and Con Edison about the challenges of restoring normalcy to the island.

Throughout the trip they shared their work on social media telling of the people they met from the farmer who spent 10 days under his house to the scientist who lost 15 years of work with the destruction of the coral reefs he was studying.

"We met some of the kindest, most generous, and welcoming people," said Senior and Post Production Manager Kelly Whritenour. "They went through something unimaginable, and I want to ensure that we respect and honor their experiences because some of the people we met were left with nothing and still they gave us food and water and kindness. Making this documentary, doing right by these people, is the only way I know how to pay them back for their hospitality."

The students' film, "Puerto Rico: Hope in the Dark" will be screened May 1 at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville and at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace's lower Manhattan campus, One Pace Plaza, New York (entrance on Spruce Street), on May 7.

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