

finding HOME

A student's Hurricane Maria survivor story

Tina Luo | Editor-in-Chief

She lay anxiously inside as the trees fell again and again, the crashes flooding her senses. Metal clanged, and the wind—the wind howled as if it would never stop. Hurricane Maria, a Category 5 hurricane, had hit Puerto Rico.

“I remember being wide awake. Because I was scared I was going to die,” senior Liliana Maldonado said.

The next morning, Maldonado could no longer recognize the world she knew. Flooded roads, destroyed houses, dead homeless people. Power lines on the ground. All was in chaos, the tension palpable, and despair soon turned into desperation.

“You had neighbors killing neighbors because there was necessities that needed to be met and there were families that needed to be fed,” Maldonado said. “They would kill each other for gas, or they would kill each other for power machines, or they would kill each other for food because it was a game of survival.”

With wind speeds up to 174 mph, Hurricane Maria's landfall in September 2017 devastated the northeastern Caribbean islands—and the lives of the people therein. Maldonado's family had planned to leave Puerto Rico eventually due to debt, crime rates, and political issues, but it was Hurricane Maria that drove them to flee so suddenly.

“We knew we had to go because there was no food anymore. No water. And we knew we were not going to go back to school,” Maldonado said.

Puerto Rican students lost their education overnight: the hurricane destroyed schools, and it was uncertain if and when they would recover. Maldonado's family kept their decision to leave a secret from everyone. To avoid suspicion, they carefully minded what they said and did before departure.

“Even my own family, we didn't tell them we moved to Texas precisely because we knew they were going to be angry. I had friends that were angry at me because they were like, well you're over there and I'm over here,” Maldonado said.

The day of the flight, Maldonado wore a disguise and avoided eye contact, afraid that someone would recognize her. The lack of power in the airport only contributed to the suffocating atmosphere.

“It was very hot, humid. And you only could pack what you needed. It was just some clothes, some toothpaste, and maybe some stuff to keep you alive,” Maldonado said.

Airplane tickets were very expensive and difficult to obtain, with many others desperate to flee the situation. Maldonado's family planned to meet up with her uncle, who had a house in Texas, but they knew securing a flight was not guaranteed.

“It was the most chaotic competition I've seen. It was crowded with people just trying to get on, but not everybody did. Think of it as your only escape. As soon as we saw that it was our turn to get on, we just ran,” Maldonado said.

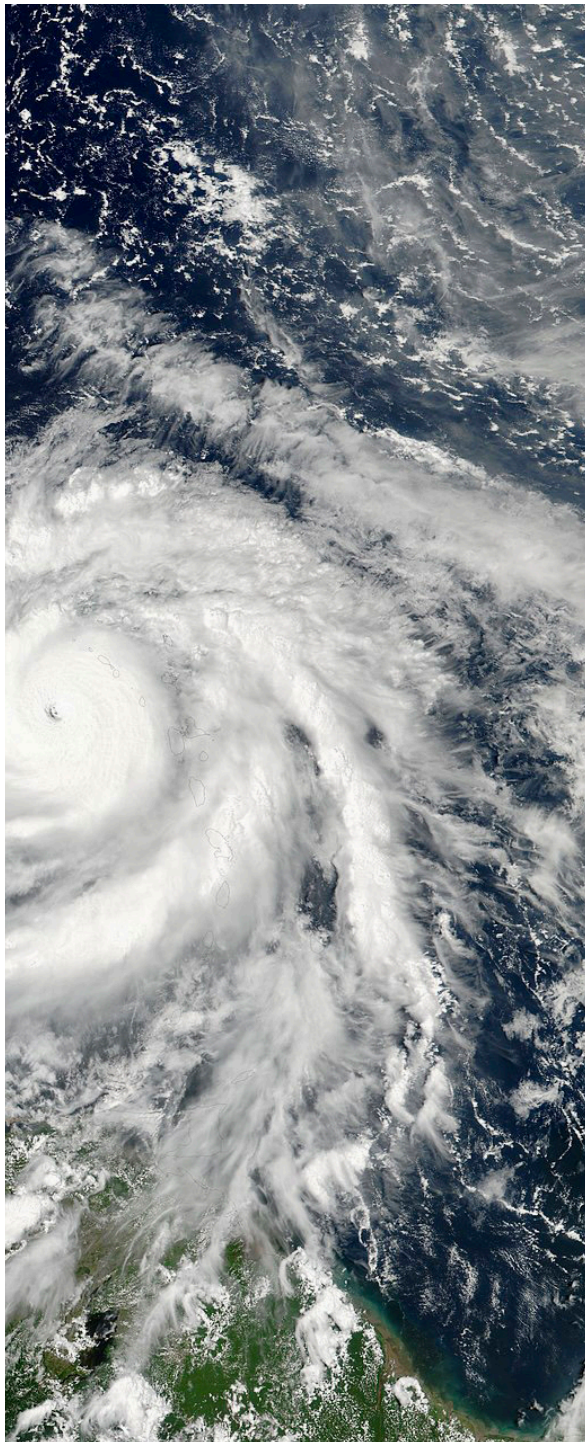
Her and her family cried when they boarded the plane, having left much of their family behind. At the time, consistent WiFi in Puerto Rico could only be accessed by those who could afford a power plant or stay at a high-end hotel. When Maldonado's friends saw that she was online for an extended period, they knew she was no longer in Puerto Rico. But she knew she could not dwell on the resentment for long.

“In Spanish we say, ‘Ponte las pilas [Get your act together].’ We had no plan but we knew we had to work. So I just worked hard, barely slept, and made sure to do the best I could,” Maldonado said.

Maldonado and her brother slept on the couch at their uncle's house, receiving clothes from a refugee program and relying on bus transportation to attend school a week later. Though Maldonado believes her family has now found some stability, the sudden overhaul of their lives was not without difficulty.

“Although I live comfortably, you feel empty, because you don't have that community that you used to have,” Maldonado said. “A lot of people would





consider life for a native Puerto Rican problematic, but that's what drew us together, so that's what felt like home."

One of the biggest adjustments for Maldonado was the entirely different people. Though Puerto Ricans saw her personality as strong and motivated, Texans found it aggressive. The worldviews of these new people further confused her.

"There was no AC in choir one day, and hearing all the girls in there complain and be really dramatic was triggering to me at the time," Maldonado said. "Because in my head I was like, why are you complaining? People in my island are without power to this day."

Now having lived in Texas for 5 years, Maldonado is no longer startled by others' comments, recognizing it as a product of different upbringings. However, the influence of her past persists, whether it be through fond childhood memories or attitudes that have shaped her being.

"It's not that I am unhappy. I do think that we do deserve the life that we have, but that doesn't mean it feels like it at times, right?" Maldonado said. "My mom just got a car, and in my eyes it's luxurious. And so my first thought was, 'I don't deserve it. We don't deserve this car because that's not what you're used to.'"

When she visits Puerto Rico, Maldonado again feels at home, but not without hesitation. Seeing the poverty and political situation in Puerto Rico, along with the difficulty of everyday life due to weekly power and light outages, remind her why she would not stay permanently. In fact, after her mom's recent wedding in Puerto Rico, her family kept wedding presents in their car for temporary storage. They parked it outside of their garage out of habit. It was stolen.

"It made me angry because I know my own Puerto Rican people did that, because although there's a sense of home, ever since Hurricane Maria and all this corruption, there is division," Maldonado said.

There is a continual tug of war between Maldonado's homes,

Puerto Rico and Texas, old and new. Though Maldonado is proud of where she is now, home remains a blurry concept.

"I'm here because we thought the grass would be greener on the other side, but it doesn't feel like home at all," Maldonado said.

There is no perfect nor black-and-white, she believes; it is in the gray that she has found her sense of self.

"I hope people see that the world they live in is not the only world that exists. There are people that go through the same as you if not worse," Maldonado said. "I want people to know that they should really be grateful for what they have because you never know when you'll lose it."



photo courtesy of Lilitiana Maldonado