Planting Plantains and Cultivating Community in Puerto Rico

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Puerto Rico: Introduction
In September 2017, hurricanes Irma and Maria caused billions of dollars of damage to Puerto Rico's infrastructure, housing and overall economy. Hurricane Maria alone was the most powerful storm to hit Puerto Rico in 90 years. The effect of these storms can still be viewed today. Our trip did not only inform us on how the economy was affected, but also gave us the opportunity to help locals complete various projects they needed help in.

A Farmer's Plantain Journey
On a bright Friday morning we headed out to a local plantain farm owned by Jose Rafael Medina Fuentes and his wife Blanca I. Cordova Diaz. We quickly realized that they not only grew plantains, but also grew coffee trees, tamarinds, coconuts and they even had a rabbit farm! We were warmly welcome with freshly made coffee and bananas from their harvest. Shortly after, we were led down a long winding path to a grass filled patch of land, which we needed to clear to plant plantain trees. Even though we had 22 student helpers, Rafael never stopped working alongside us, and he was even outworking us! His humbleness and work ethic was inspiring to see while working with him. Rafael even lent us some tools at the end of the day so we could use in the garden we were building.

A New Start
Our biggest project during the trip was building a large medicinal garden for the Universidad Interamericana Barranquitas, Puerto Rico. This was the first garden being built in their University, and the students and staff were excited to see the results. During the workday you would see us and the Puerto Rican students working proudly while we enjoyed the loud Latin music playing. This project was the most enlightening, as we were given the opportunity to work with lots of different people and had to find ways to utilize everyone's strengths.

Cleaning our way to the beach
Additionally, we also participated in a beach cleanup at one of Puerto Rico’s most visited beaches. I had the pleasure of working alongside a friend and we competed to see who could find the most plastic. What surprised us both was that in the stretch of a 10-minute walk uphill, we could overfill a large trash bag with discarded bottles. We found bottles that were over 15 years old! I was not expecting this much trash on such a short path, and that the trash would be decades old.

Reflection Of Trip
His trip was filled with a lot of wonderful experiences, from being able to see entire hills filled with plantains, and a patch of bare land transformed, to seeing a beautiful beach cleaned. Every one of these locations brought learning experiences that have changed my view on various matters. Watching the plantain farmer work and treat us like family made me realize how one of my future objectives for life is to be humble and hard working regardless of my success. Working alongside my peers in a large project taught me a very important career skill, which is how to work in teams. Learning to balance individual and group work while navigating through the diverse perspectives of my peers was a struggle during the project, but I ended up very satisfied with how we were able to work together toward a common goal. This trip was a wonderful experience that I will treasure the rest of my life, and I was able to make connections that will make a difference in both my professional and educational career.

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