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Graduate students organize collection campaigns to benefit Puerto Rico

For Angelica Medina-Cucurella and Sylmarie Davila-Montero, Hurricane Maria’s devastation of Puerto Rico on Sept. 20 hit too close to home.

The engineering graduate students were among the almost 40 Puerto Rican students at MSU who waited nervously to hear if family and friends were safe after the storm ravaged the Caribbean island. Puerto Rican authorities estimate there was $45-$95 billion in damages to the power grid and the island infrastructure. Residents continue to endure disruptions that include limits on electricity, water, food, and gasoline.

Medina-Cucurella, a graduate student in chemical engineering from Toa Alta, and Davila-Montero, a graduate student in electrical and computer engineering from Caguas, were compelled to help.

“I got an early message that everyone was OK but then there was no communications for three days,” Medina-Cucurella said. “I didn’t hear from friends for at least two weeks.”
News about the storm-damaged island was not good. Thousands of roofs had been ripped off buildings. Trees blocked roadways. Residents were waiting four-to-seven hours for crucial services, including groceries and gasoline.

Both women knew they had to do something.

Working with fellow Puerto Rican students and a variety of offices in the College of Engineering and around MSU, they issued a plea for packaged water, food, baby items, batteries, and many other items.

“I was not prepared for the generosity we experienced,” Medina-Cucurella said. “When I saw the donation piles waiting for us – I sent out the cry to our volunteers to ‘bring boxes and tape!’”

The collection campaign yielded 263 boxes and 173 water packs.

In the meantime, the duo collaborated with like-minded volunteers at the University of Michigan. With the help of MSU’s IFP office, they were able to transport MSU’s 370 boxes to Ann Arbor. There, they joined with hundreds more from the University of Michigan, Western Michigan University and “a collection of folks,” she said.

The Michigan-united collection shipped on Oct. 29 to the Puerto Rico Family Institute in New York City, which promised to get it to the island nation safely.

Mission accomplished.

What the two “happy but tired” graduate students quickly discovered, though, was that MSU’s generous community wasn’t done giving, yet. Calls to come over and retrieve more donated supplies kept coming, Medina-Cucurella said.

So working through their Sloan Engineering Program and advisor Dr. Percy Pierre, a smaller Phase 2 collection – with household items like pet food and clothes, and a variety of packaged, non-perishable foods – was completed.

“It was a lot of work but we felt extremely happy with it,” Davila-Montero said. “We hope it will make a difference somehow.”

Dr. Pierre is financing the Phase 2 shipment to the relief center temporarily opened at Caribbean University in Bayamon in Puerto Rico.

“One of the things I didn’t expect during this was the number of Puerto Ricans I met around Michigan State during our collection drive,” Medina-Cucurella said. “And one of the images I’ll always remember is from Facebook -- as supplies are arriving in Puerto Rico, the photos being posted on social media show that the packages are marked, ‘With Love from New York’ and other places. I’m proud to know there’s hundreds of items headed to Puerto Rico with love from
MSU, too,” she added.

**MSU and Puerto Rico --**

MSU has a long-standing relationship with Puerto Rico. Since 1998, Dr. Percy Pierre has worked with the Sloan Engineering Program to recruit and graduate underrepresented doctoral students in engineering fields. Pierre is a member of the prestigious National Academy of Engineering and a professor of electrical and computer engineering.

“We have a relationship there, our work in Puerto Rico isn’t just a new idea,” he explained.

In the past 20 years, a number of talented students have come to MSU for advanced studies in engineering. Among them are Sloan graduate Nelson Sepulveda, now an award-winning associate professor of electrical and computer engineering at MSU.

The relationship is also a two-way street, with MSU graduate students receiving educational support through Puerto Rico’s Kinesis Fellowships.

“I’m very proud of all our Sloan students who helped collect items for Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. “Very proud of all of them,” Dr. Pierre added.

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