Champions of Change: It came at night

Part I

As the skies darkened over the little Puerto Rican island of Vieques in September of 2017, Adry and her husband Jesus hunkered down with their two young children in a small middle room of their family home to wait. Hurricane Maria was headed straight for the little island community of 9,000 people and everyone knew that meant some may not survive the night. Adry fed her children Benadryl to help them sleep through what was coming so they wouldn’t be scared.

“It came in at night and lasted all night to morning. It was a monster,” said Adry nearly a year later.

Now, Adry can safely reflect on the disaster that turned out to be the precipice to bringing her family to a new beginning in Aroostook County.

Vieques, a tiny island, just to the east of Puerto Rico, was the first place to be hit by the hurricanes – first in a brush with Hurricane Irma, and then, just a short number of days later, in a direct hit from Maria. The latter storm destroyed everything on the island, cutting off any communications, transportation, electricity, water, medical, or food supplies the community received from the nearby big island that suffered as much catastrophic damage to its own infrastructures during the event.

Fortunately, the family home where Adry, Jesus and the children sought shelter was concrete. Any wooden structure on the island did not survive the winds, and even parts of their concrete home collapsed around them as they worked through the night to keep the water from flooding into the small space where they huddled together. They lost power early on, before even the worst of the storm had passed overhead. So for hours throughout the night, they listened in the dark as roofs blew off buildings, trees uprooted, and the wind tossed cars like they were plastic toys.

“It was traumatic for the kids. The storm, it sounded like a monster. It felt like an earthquake and moved the whole house. It even broke the floor. We boarded the windows to avoid objects flying in the air. We knew it stopped when we could no longer hear the wind,” said Adry.

Perhaps the only thing worse than the wind, however, was the eerie chaos greeting them with the sunrise. All the usual happy sounds of daybreak on the island replaced with a deafening silence.

“It was like a nuclear bomb had gone off,” said Adry, recalling the scene as they emerged from their crumbled home in the morning. “Everything was gone – the trees, the grass, the earth, everything on the island. Sand and water were everywhere. It destroyed everything.”

Buildings and shipping docks and boats and cars – all gone. As were the humble jobs that, just the day before, fed and housed their family. Jesus worked in construction, and Adry worked as a teller in a bank. With their home and most belongings (including photos, identification papers, etc.) destroyed, no jobs, and thrust from having something to having nothing, Adry and Jesus had decisions to make, but all of that would have to wait, because for the time being, they were trapped on an island with several thousand other people facing the same dire situation and no help in immediate sight.

In “It Came at Night” Part II, Adry and Jesus endure months on the island, but eventually make it to the mainland, following a path that will lead them to Aroostook County.

[End Part I]
Part II

In “It Came at Night” Part I, Adry, Jesus and their two children had survived Hurricane Maria, but are left to deal with the aftermath. They’ve lost all of their belongings, their home is destroyed, and their jobs no longer exist. They look to an uncertain future.

Months passed before Adry and Jesus and their children found their way off their little island home and on to a new path and a new beginning. The military arrived sometime after the hurricane and instituted curfews and rationing rules to keep looting down and to help distribute supplies. For months after they left, though, the island remained without power and with limited communication and access to food, water and much needed medical supplies. All of those things went first to the main island of Puerto Rico, and then to the smaller communities like Vieques. To further complicate things, the docks for supply ships and the airports that could access the island were all damaged and unusable for some time.

“Nothing could come in,” said Adry.

And nobody could get out, at least at first.

It was Adry’s boss from the bank who ultimately helped them connect with family in Florida. He had a satellite phone and when resources became available in December, three months after the hurricane, so he could charge it, he let Adry and others use it to contact help. Adry’s sister-in-law helped facilitate their travel off the island and brought them to live with her family in a small mobile home in Homestead, Florida.

There were eight people staying in the small mobile home, but it was the first seed of hope Adry and her husband felt in months, so they set out to rebuild. That meant making the best of the situation and beginning to look for work so they could hopefully find a home of their own eventually. If they had been the only people fleeing hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico, then that task may have been more possible. After three months of searching and trying to find help to no avail, hope once again began to fade. Rules in the association where her sister-in-law’s mobile home limited the amount of time she could have house guests, so they were quickly running out of time.

Another sister-in-law had made her way to Maine and although it meant an extreme change in climate and culture for the family, her story of what she found when she arrived here inspired them to follow.

“It was the last option we had. We took a gamble,” said Adry.

They arrived in northernmost Maine in spring of 2018, almost eight months after the hurricane. For a few days, they stayed with their extended family in Madawaska, but the apartment was small and they knew they needed to take deliberate steps to secure their future as soon as possible. They moved into Aroostook County’s only homeless shelter in Presque Isle where they experienced two more pivotal moments in their journey – they saw snowfall for the first time ever, and they met ACAP Coach Heidi Rackliffe. Within two weeks, Rackliffe had helped the family secure their own housing in a duplex apartment. They never complained about their stay in the shelter, and were grateful to have a warm, comfortable place to sleep. Having their own space again, though, meant that after months of being in limbo after having lost everything, they could finally start moving forward.

In “It Came at Night Part III, Adry and Jesus settle into the community and make fast progress towards establishing a new life for their family.
Part II

In "It Came at Night" Part II, Adry and Jesus made it off their hurricane-ravaged island homeland and to Aroostook County via Florida and with the help of some family connections.

ACAP Coach Heidi Rackliffe connected Jesus with a job coach who quickly assessed that Jesus was a skilled construction worker. Although construction work on the islands can be quite different than construction work in Aroostook County – different building materials, different codes, etc. – the skills Jesus possessed were transferable and he had a base of knowledge to help him learn on the job. Jesus completed a 4-week on-the-job training with Buck Construction, who then hired him full time.

With Jesus earning enough income to support the majority of the family's living expenses, and the kids enrolled in school in Presque Isle, Adry is now beginning to look for work for herself.

“We’re happy. I like this place. The people here are kind and good,” said Adry. “I don’t want to return to Vieques again.”

Language has been a slight barrier, but Adry learned to speak English when working at her former bank job due to the large number of English-speaking tourists who frequented the island. She does most of the translating for the family.

“People have patience and try to speak slow for me,” said Adry.

The teachers in the kids’ school are working diligently to bridge the communication gap as well. They’ve paired the two children with another girl who speaks Spanish and the teachers are making an effort to learn their language while teaching them English. The children are flourishing in their school environment, and their daughter is an honors student.

“Here is very different,” said Adry. “Here the people are willing to help. It’s very different than in other places.”

Rebuilding can be difficult for anyone who suffers a tragedy, but to do so in an entirely different area, with language and cultural barriers might seem overwhelming to some. Adry said for them, the hurricane was like a blessing in disguise, taking them from a situation they may never have left, and putting them on a path to a much better life for their children.

“Puerto Rico is not getting better right now. It’s not a good place to live. I think God put us in a situation to help us understand that there were better options. We would never have made the decision to get on a plane and move out of the islands to go to the states. That changed when Maria came. It changed our hearts, too. Sometimes, God takes you out of something to show you something can be better,” said Adry.

While there have been pitfalls and stumbling blocks along their path, the couple is working on a long-term goal of purchasing a house in the area and putting down permanent roots.

“Here is a good place to find work, to start a better life, and it’s a good place to grow the kids,” said Adry.