

## CASEY: Salem couple scrambles to aid victims of Hurricane Maria

Erick Anderson's a native of Puerto Rico, and his mother and other relatives still live there. Since Hurricane Maria struck, he and his wife, Whitney, have sent shipments of food and essential supplies to the devastated island. But they believe the federal government could be doing much more in the recovery effort.

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Whitney and Erick Anderson  
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There are a few things Erick and Whitney Anderson would like you to know about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, and the catastrophe still unfolding on that Caribbean island.

First: It's a U.S. territory (and has been for more than a century). Second: It's roughly 35 miles wide and 100 miles long, which makes it bigger in land area than both Delaware and Rhode Island.

Third: All Puerto Ricans are natural-born American citizens. Fourth: Though most pay no federal income tax, the island remitted \$3.6 billion to the federal treasury last year. Fifth: Puerto Rico's more populous than 20 American states. Roughly 3.4 million people live there.

In the wake of Hurricane Maria, which made a direct hit on the island nearly a month ago, almost all of them are still suffering greatly. Tuesday, 83 percent of the island remained without electric power, and in many places that do have it, it's for a few hours per day.

Water treatment requires electricity; thus, the flow from taps is greatly hampered. Blocked and washed-out roads and collapsed bridges are preventing distribution of food and bottled water. Hospitals are closed — Maria creamed them, too. In some towns, the hurricane destroyed 60 percent of the dwellings.

All of this is a huge concern to the Salem couple. Erick, 48, a computer network engineer, was born in Puerto Rico and spent his first 27 years there. (Whitney, 40, the internet communications manager at Roanoke College, met him there during a semester abroad from Virginia Tech two decades ago). Erick's mom, a teacher who lives in San Juan, and at least 14 other uncles, aunts and cousins are still there.

Most of them are in the small town of Ciales (pop. 18,000), where Erick spent much of his youth. Situated in a valley, it's about a 45-minute drive from San Juan, in the island's mountainous interior.

Maria acted in Puerto Rico like a gargantuan tornado. During the hurricane, winds roared at up to 155 miles per hour, ruining crops, felling and stripping trees, and nearly 40 inches of rain fell in some places on a single day. To put that in perspective, it's roughly four times the amount that fell in Roanoke, over four days, producing the flood of 1985.

For the first two weeks after the storm, the Andersons had zero communications with Erick's relatives. More recently, it's been very hit-and-miss, mostly messaging via cellphone.

"It's like they've gone back in time 100 years," Whitney told me. "People are doing their laundry in the river. They're bathing in the river. They're drinking from the river. More than half the sewage treatment plants are down. There's raw sewage in the river."

Though the official death toll from earlier this week stood at 48, reports from news media on the island have left the Andersons deeply suspicious of that number. Some accounts peg the dead at 10 times the official count.

"What we're hearing is it's many, many, many more," Whitney said.

"We've heard that people are burying their loved ones in their back yards," Erick said.

In the aftermath, the Andersons have been scrambling to send help to relatives and others. They started with nonperishable food, ferried by an airline-employee cousin of Erick's, after San Juan's airport reopened. More recently, they've relied on the U.S. mail.

Tuesday, their dining room table was covered with handheld water filters, bottles of hand sanitizer, solar powerbanks, batteries and mini-lanterns. Those are headed out in eight care packages.

So far, the couple have spent \$400 of their own money and another \$2,100 raised from friends and family on six shipments of food and supplies.

"By and large, people have been compassionate and loving and giving — they've given us money to help us do what we're doing," Whitney said.

Erick's mother, Silvana, 69, picked up the first shipment at the San Juan airport when it reopened after Maria. She organized the stuff for delivery to Ciales, but couldn't drive there until the roads were clear. Then she waited all day in a line to buy gasoline for her car, to make the trip. By the time she arrived, eight days had passed since the storm.

One of Erick's cousins lost two cars and all her other belongings when her single-story home was flooded up to its ceiling. She had to be rescued from it. The roof of an aunt's two-story home blew away in the storm. Some towns and cities have re-flooded several times from subsequent rain.

Surveying the tragedy via TV and social media from 1,500 miles away has left the Andersons with deep wells of frustration and a mixture of other emotions.

They've been buoyed by efforts of volunteers, such as celebrity chef Jose Andres, who's organized a gigantic meals-delivery effort said to be preparing up to 100,000 meals a day.

And they've cheered smaller actions, such as when volunteers on the ground rigged a rope-and-pulley system to ferry necessary aid to residents of a small town cut from travel by washed-away bridges.

But they've cringed at comments they've read on social media portraying Puerto Ricans as entitled and ungrateful. Listening to them vent, you can't miss tinges of bitterness that America's government is doing far, far too little to help citizens suffering on the island.

They cited one statistic trumpeted on the news this week — that 80 percent of supermarkets have reopened. What many don't understand, the couple noted, is that an open supermarket with little food and no lights or refrigeration doesn't do anyone much good.

"We have food and water, but we don't have trucks and truck drivers," Erick said. "We don't have enough boots on the ground."

"Why can't [the Federal Emergency Action Agency] do better, instead of getting to some towns and giving out Vienna sausages and Skittles?" Whitney asked. "It's a leadership issue."

Much of their anger is focused on President Donald Trump.

"After he went to the island, both of us were so angry we were shaking," Whitney said. "They took him to the richest suburb of San Juan that had the least amount of damage. He spent most of his time in an airplane hanger, telling them it wasn't a real catastrophe," Whitney said.

"It's been too little, too late," she said.

A day after Trump visited Puerto Rico, Erick said, the president went to Las Vegas. But his tone there was different. He didn't minimize the scale of the massacre, like he did in San Juan, when he noted the number of people killed by Maria was minuscule compared to deaths in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"The Vegas shooting was not a catastrophe compared to 9/11," Erick said with a mixture of cynicism and sadness.

"Why would he say that to Puerto Rico?"

(Whitney Anderson has a blog on which she's listed ways individuals can help in the Puerto Rico recovery effort. You can visit that at [whitneyanderick.com/puertorico](http://whitneyanderick.com/puertorico).)

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### Dan Casey

Dan Casey knows a little bit about a lot of things but not a heck of a lot about most things. That doesn't keep him from writing about them, however. So keep him honest!