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# Displaced by Storm, Puerto Rican Students Land in New York

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS JAN. 28, 2018

There was pastrami on rye cut into quarters, spinach knishes and little black and white cookies laid out neatly on a buffet table. There were also long tin trays of tostones and empanadas, and plastic jugs of red and green salsa.

This was the meal New York University laid out on Thursday night to formally welcome 57 college students from Puerto Rico whose studies were knocked off course by Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island in September. Among them was Amanda Godreau, who nibbled a ham and cheese empanada and waded through the churn of her own conflicting emotions.

“I get this great opportunity,” she said of her time at N.Y.U. “But it’s available to me because of horrible circumstances.”

Four months after the hurricane, Puerto Rico is still far from mended. About a third of utility customers are still without electricity. Hundreds of schools are in the dark. And last week, the administration of Gov. Ricardo A. Rosselló released a financial rescue plan that projects Puerto Rico would not be able to pay down any of

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N.Y.U. is one of a group of educational institutions in the 50 states that has offered to help. Public university systems in New York and Connecticut, for example, have extended in-state tuition rates to students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as did the City University of New York, which says 78 students are enrolled under that arrangement. Sixty-two students displaced from Puerto Rico are enrolled for the spring term at Miami Dade College. And expensive private universities, like N.Y.U. and Tulane in New Orleans, have given students a free ride for the semester, though they ask that they pay tuition to their home institutions.

But Ms. Godreau said that being able to access such opportunities in the first place requires a certain degree of privilege. She said she found out about N.Y.U.'s offer because she was in Tampa, Fla., with her mother, a place where, unlike at home, she had access to the internet. There are plane tickets to buy and high costs associated with living in a place as expensive as New York — the \$121 price tag on a monthly unlimited MetroCard made her mouth fall open on Thursday.

She is one of the lucky ones, she said. And she is determined to make the most of it.

Ms. Godreau, 19, has a big, embracing smile that she seems to wear even when she doesn't realize it. She grew up mostly in Cayey, P.R. Her mother, a cultural anthropologist, is a researcher there at the University of Puerto Rico, where Ms. Godreau is in her sophomore year. She loves photography and wants to study art, and has picked up some spending money over the years working as an assistant to wedding photographers and as a photographer herself.

She arrived in New York a little over a week ago, and has started many of her days by putting on several shirts and three pairs of pants — thermal leggings, felt leggings and then, jeans.

“I'm not used to this!” she said as she stepped out into a sunny twentysomething degrees. This week, she also bought her first ever plant, a tiny succulent she planned to name Albert, for which she paid \$5. Puerto Rico is so lush, she said, it never occurred to her to have a plant in her room. But she misses green. She also misses her mother, who is now back in Puerto Rico.

Nonetheless, she rattles off in excitement to her new friends about how they should transfer into her design class, where she is learning about typography. She is giddy about her American Sign Language class, where students sit in a silence so dense you can hear each second marked by a clock on the wall.

But Puerto Rico wants to hang on to its educated population, and these mainland opportunities have the potential to rattle some nerves on the island. Indeed, Columbia University was planning to take in some college students, said Carlos J. Alonso, dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, but its contact at the University of Puerto Rico said school leaders had decided they were not going to encourage undergraduates to leave. So instead, Columbia is matching graduate students with about 80 research opportunities in its labs — some research simply cannot be performed without reliable electricity.

N.Y.U. said its program is temporary, and it is not hoping to be the last stop for these students. But some may choose not to go back home, like Ms. Godreau who is working on applications to transfer from the University of Puerto Rico. She said she was already thinking of leaving before the storm for a school with more of a digital arts focus. She's looking at some schools in Canada, despite the cold.

In the meantime, when she meets people around campus, she does not highlight the program that brought her to N.Y.U. because she doesn't like all the questions about the storm. And it's even worse when people forget.

“Oh, it's beautiful there!” she sometimes hears. “But it's not right now.”

Patricia Mazzei contributed reporting