



P.E.C.E.S. a Strong Force in the Eastern Region

Presented by



If anyone knows the value to the community of an organization like PECES, it is José Oquendo. At present, he is the president of the organization. However, he never forgets that he himself is a product of its programs or the positive impact those initiatives have had on thousands of lives over the past 35 years.

PECES played a prominent role in Humacao and much of the eastern region of the island in developing reconstruction initiatives and channeling funds after Hurricane María. But that leading role is the result of three decades of developing community leaders, especially among the younger population.

Oquendo says that PECES was created as a response to social problems—particularly poverty, unemployment, and school dropouts—in Punta Santiago, Humacao. The Community Dedication and Service Education Program (PECES, by its Spanish acronym) emerged from the pastoral work that Sister Nancy Madden carried out in the area, and from a group of residents who sought to address the needs of the community. And since the beginning, they have worked towards education and economic development.

"We are resilient, but very human"

Experiencing Irma and Maria in 2017 made them rethink how to respond to "an emergency event that affected both housing and the primary needs of people." As part of their response, they created the Community Sustainability Center to facilitate the recovery process and promote resilience. The lessons they learned in the process, he explains, have also served to empower the community towards preventing and resolving crises. But even with all those lessons learned, 2020 has put the community to the test. The earthquakes—along with the threat of tsunamis—and recurring floods, as well as the pandemic, have raised many fears among residents. "We are resilient, but very human," he emphasizes.

The leading role the organization has taken on is the result of three decades of developing community leaders, especially among the younger population.

Celebrating Success Stories

The alternative education model school is one of the organization's greatest prides. "I don't like talking about suffering; I prefer to celebrate the success stories of these young people," he says, referring to the students at that high school. He explains that many of them had to interrupt their studies and have led very difficult lives. However, they have been able to overcome every challenge, which is something that must be celebrated.

"It fills me with pride that beyond the services we provide, we help transform people's lives," he says, with satisfaction.

Each year, the model school serves about 250 young people from the area.

Future and Resilience

Recent experiences have helped them become a stronger organization, but they wish to go the extra mile and are in the process of identifying a resilient building that will allow them to develop a

command center, which will enable them to quickly respond during any kind of future emergency event.

In addition, they continue to expand the services offered by the Community Sustainability Center. Among these services is the delivery of food to bedridden people and families facing difficult times. Another future initiative that is being considered is the establishment of a health clinic to serve community needs, with special focus on the needs of the large group of older adults in the region.

"PECES is an organization with a great track record of work and positive impact in Puerto Rico. Its work after the hurricanes of 2017 has been a great example for the third sector. At Triple-S Foundation, we want to support them as they continue expanding and building a more resilient Community Sustainability Center, as well as contribute to their efforts towards promoting food security among the older population," said Ivelisse M. Fernández, executive director of the Triple-S Foundation.