



Skål International Puerto Rico Weathered the Storm

By Ronald C. Flores-Gunkle

“You Can’t Keep a Good Club Down,” could be the motto for Skål International Puerto Rico. Not that the 2017 hurricane season didn’t try! Three hurricanes battered the Northeastern Caribbean in September, but Hurricane María, the deadliest storm in a century, tried the hardest. It succeeded in destroying Dominica and caused catastrophic damage throughout the region, but especially in Puerto Rico.

Total losses reached almost \$100 billion and more than 3,000 people lost their lives. The power grid was wiped out and a year after the storm more than half a million people were still without electricity—the longest power outage in US history.

With many businesses closed, tourism was at a virtual standstill and roads and other infrastructure were being repaired at an agonizingly slow rate. Our club struggled to survive.

Many Skalleagues suspended operations to repair their property and assist in the recovery. However, Skalleagues are resilient and throughout the blackouts and the recovery period, a hardy core group managed to meet almost every month.

I was not among them. A few days after Hurricane María, I traveled to India to represent Puerto Rico Skål during the World Congress in Hyderabad. My wife and I decided not to return to the island until conditions improved and power was restored—but after five months in “exile,” we returned to the island to begin repairs on our property and resume contact with my Skalleagues. Power finally was restored two months after our return.

Two things were on our group’s minds: how can we retain our membership until the industry rebounded and how can we continue supporting the charities that now needed us more than ever? From a high of 80 members years ago, our numbers plummeted to barely 20 after the storm—and we feared losing more.

Both fears turned out to be unwarranted. We were Skalleagues and we had friends. The first wave of support came from three fellow clubs in the USA. Through the efforts of Martha McClintock of the Jacksonville club in Florida, who contacted me while I was off the island, its members offered to donate the toys from their annual drive to our children’s charities in Puerto Rico. The Philadelphia and Atlantic City clubs joined Jacksonville and together they sent dozens of boxes of gifts. Skål Puerto Rico President Ivan Puig, VP Robert Rodriguez, Board members Maritza Toste and Sylvia Rivera and Secretary Charlotte Ware presented the gifts at San Jorge Children’s Hospital. Our reward—as I wrote at the time—was miles of smiles!

Another major problem was solved by a GoFundMe campaign suggested to me by the 2018 Executive Committee of Skål International USA. The campaign sought funds to sustain the Puerto Rico club during the critical times after the hurricane. Through the support of a dozen clubs and many generous individual Skalleagues, \$3,000 was raised and the club was able to meet its operating expenses and retain members we may have lost.

With the success of this campaign, president-elect Robert Rodriguez and I decided to launch one final GoFundMe effort to benefit Hogar el Pequeño Joshua, a home for infants and toddlers in the mountains of Puerto Rico that Skål Puerto Rico Past President Maritza Toste was instrumental in having the club “adopt” many years before.

During a visit to my home, the former Skål New York President and my good friend Peter Lintner began the fund with his personal contribution and offered to present the concept to the New York club. Soon thereafter we received a generous cheque from New York Skål!

The children at the home received many gifts of toys—including a dozen wooden trucks my brother Robert Flores handcrafted in Indiana and donated for them—but the home was also in need of funds for storm-related repairs. As of this writing, some 31 Skalleagues and friends have donated \$2,705 and we hope to make our \$3,000 goal before the campaign ends on March 15.

There is lots of good news from Puerto Rico. Our club has endured and will celebrate its 60th anniversary this year. Our island is in full recovery, nearly all our hotels and resorts have reopened and are helping visitors discover or rediscover the glory that is Puerto Rico, business in general has improved and—most important to us—we have been able to continue bring smiles to many needy children. No hurricane could take that away from us!



Skalleagues Ronald Flores and Maritza Toste at Hogar el Pequeño Joshua.



Skålleagues unloading gifts at San Jorge Children's Hospital



Child Unwrapping Gifts



Puerto Rico Skålleagues
Ivan Puig, Charlotte
Ware, Maritza Toste,
Robert Rodriguez and
Sylvia Rivera. Standing I.
unidentified volunteer.