



▶ When hurricanes Irma and Maria destroyed hundreds of homes and displaced thousands of people in the U.S. Virgin Islands last fall, some people sent money and supplies. A smaller group showed up. They left their lives and families, dealt with occasional awkwardness and tetanus shots, to see what they could do to help. This is their story.

▶ BY JAMES LYNCH

▶ PHOTOGRAPHS BY DREW ALSTON

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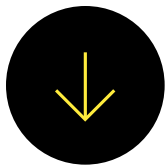
**AFTER**

**THE**

**STORM**

Across the islands on November 9, 2017, blue FEMA tarps serve as temporary coverage for roofs blown off by the hurricanes' wind.





**A DISEMBODIED VOICE** blasts through tinny speakers in every room of the seven-hundred-foot-long ship. “Hey everyone, this is your cruise director, Mr. Chicago!—a.k.a. Christian—here to tell you all about tonight’s big happenings!” The men and women around me sigh—they hear this every night. I just got here. Mr. Chicago reads through a list of activities, and he’s really putting some va-voom into it: a cornhole tournament! bingo! half-price spa sessions! The ship, the *Grand Celebration*, owned and operated by the Bahamas Paradise Cruise Line, is docked in Little Krum Bay, on the island of St. Thomas, United States territory, under a sky that’s even bluer than on those travel-agent pamphlets.

It’s 4 p.m. Passengers wander the decks. After Mr. Chicago is done, incongruous, anonymous electronic dance music pulses through the ship. The staff wears pressed white jackets. They smile. A woman pushes a cart of cleaning supplies from room to room. A waiter carries a plate of hamburger buns. To look at them, this could be any family-friendly cruise that stopped by St. Thomas so Mom and Dad could sneak away for some rum.

Overheating in my khakis, reasonable for New England in November, I walk down hallways covered with plastic sheeting and up cardboard-covered stairs, protected from the dirt and grime of work boots and unwashed hands. I walk past the polished brass sconces and railings, and into my room. The two twin beds are pushed close together beneath an overworked air-conditioning vent—too close together, is my first thought—their sheets and blankets pulled taut. A tiny TV in the corner plays *Avatar*, the James Cameron movie, with no sound, beside a porthole that affords a view of the concrete dock below. Down there, National Guardsmen stand with rifles hanging off their shoulders.

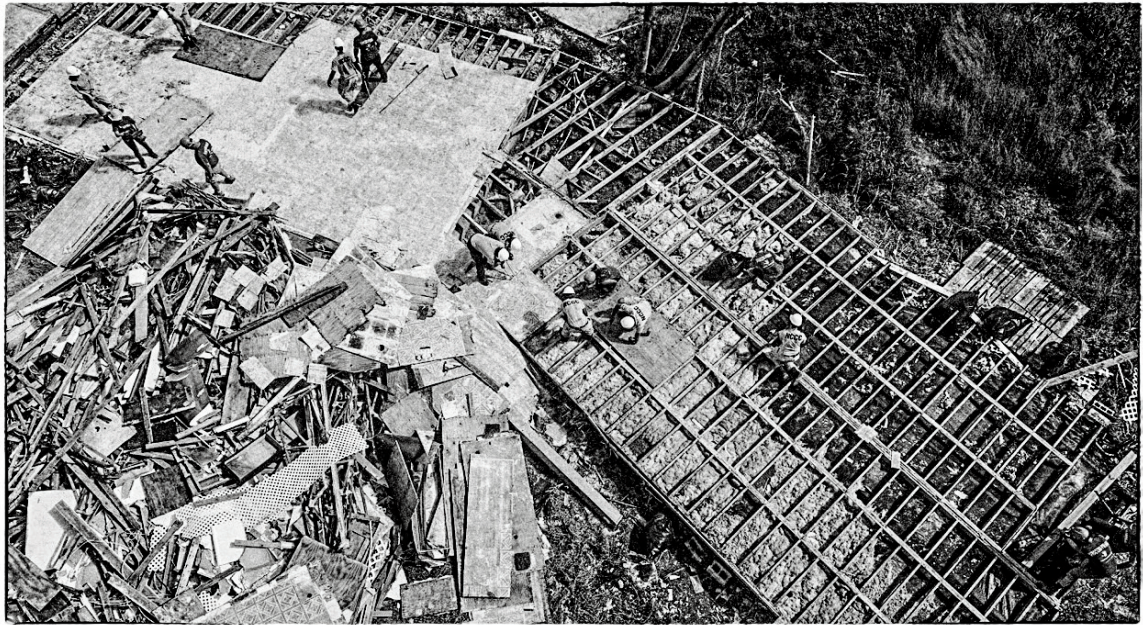
In the far bed, a middle-aged man rolls over to face the door as I walk in.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hi,” I say.

My new roommate works for FEMA, and he’s been down here long enough that his scruff has moved firmly into beard territory—forty days of his forty-five-day stint. He tells me that he and the rest of his crew arrived in St. Thomas from Louisiana and some other southeastern states thinking they’d be swinging hammers. Instead they sit behind desks helping locals get funding to clean and rebuild. I set my small pack in the corner. There’s a meeting coming up for the volunteers who are here with All Hands, the organization I’ll be working with. They have teams all over the world to help communities rebuild. They help homeowners clear wreckage from the dark corners of destroyed houses. They’re one of many such organizers of work—groups that try to coordinate and impose order on the chaos of good intentions that hurricanes tend to produce. By the time I leave they’ll formally combine with another one

**FROM THE FRONT DOOR I CAN SEE THROUGH TO THE BACK WALL—TWISTED METAL STUDS, FLOATING ELECTRICAL BOXES.**



Volunteers demolish the remains of a condemned preschool, sorting recyclable metal, wood, building supplies, and children’s toys.

of these groups to become All Hands and Hearts.

I’ll have to grab something to eat before the meeting, so I change into a shirt that I think will give off the “chill guy” and “hard worker” vibe all at once, something that doesn’t reveal how weirded out I am by the fact that I was at JFK six hours ago and now I’m on the *Grand Celebration* watching *Avatar* with a stranger who works for FEMA while, all over this island, people are apparently eating canned food and have no power.

I go with threadbare and floral, then walk out as my roommate rolls back over.

Like animals to the watering hole, through the dining hall roam packs of workers wearing the same cargo shorts, graphic tees, and goatees: Army National Guard, Conservation Corps, World Bank, Department of Energy, FEMA, electrical linemen, and people like me, who have no special skills but thought they might be able to help. I sidestep the darting waiters and check out the salad bar and the individually plated squares of blueberry cheesecake. There’s a Pepsi machine and a roast station, where a chef in a white coat and an unreasonably tall toque smiles at me. I linger at the all-you-can-eat chicken teriyaki. The dance music throbs.

It’s all as inspiring as it is strange. About eight weeks ago, in September, two Category 5 hurricanes ripped through the U.S. Virgin Islands within two weeks—Irma, then Maria. They tore the trees off the sides of mountains, washed the foundations out from beneath steep roads, threw small boats and massive yachts alike high up on the shore, and blasted the everyday belongings of people’s lives into the backyards, into the streets, and into the water. The storms also knocked out most of the hotels, so when the people from faraway places like Miami and Oklahoma and Vermont and Alaska bought plane tickets and

showed up at the airport at Charlotte Amalie, the capital of St. Thomas, carrying duffel bags of work clothes, there weren’t many beds. So FEMA rented a cruise ship. A floating hotel.

The help reflex is powerful. There was no formal request from the people of St. Thomas for strangers to fly down and clean up their island so they could try to put their lives back together; who would even know how to ask for help like that? But people flew down anyway. We got ourselves here, to this cruise ship with seven bars and an all-you-can-eat buffet, so we could work. The question is, now what?

**A FEW OF THE PEOPLE** I talked with before leaving home were surprised I was going to the Virgin Islands. They had mostly heard about the trouble in Puerto Rico. Some didn’t even realize the islands are part of the United States, which St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas have been since 1917 when the U.S., concerned with naval positions in the years leading up to World War I, bought what were then known as the Danish West Indies for \$25 million.

The USVI have a nonvoting member in the House of Representatives. The more than a hundred thousand residents are Americans. They fight in American wars and pay American taxes in American dollars. Once a major stopping point in the slave trade and a center for sugarcane and rum production, the islands’ main industry now is tourism. Year-round, people arrive on cruise ships and planes for the beautiful water, the beaches, the national park, the drinks served in coconuts.

The All Hands volunteers meet every night to talk about the day’s work and get their assignments for the coming day. On the *Grand Celebration*, we meet in the Regal Room, a bar on the ninth deck.

From the height of the ship, the damage on shore doesn’t look so bad. A few overturned sailboats, some blue tarps on roofs. From the Regal Room, it’s different. Some of my fifty new coworkers showered in time for the meeting and sit in the clustered leather chairs wearing Chacos and Birkenstocks, T-shirts advertising the locations of other disaster-response projects. Others hadn’t had time. They come covered in dry-

wall dust, dark mud speckling their fronts, streaking past the hem of worn-out shirts to the legs of ripped jeans, tan November skin peering through holes. I listen to the names of homeowners whose ruined houses we’ll work on tomorrow. We’ll be muck-and-gutting.

As the meeting breaks up, I walk one level up to an outdoor bar and order a beer from a bartender in a reflective rayon Hawaiian shirt. As I sip from the cold can, I try to remember the six rules of volunteering, which I just learned: 1. Don’t die. 2. Never. Ever. Open the fridge. 3. Be flexible. 4. When in doubt, smash it out. 5. Don’t lose the keys. 6. Don’t be a dick.

**SINCE THE STORMS**, there are no traffic lights on St. Thomas. Wires and brackets swing from drooping lines like stems of plucked apples over the bedlam of intersections. Cars move past one another, their drivers leaning out open windows or staring through improvised windshields of Saran Wrap and duct tape, punctuating their movements with short friendly blats of the car horn. It’s neighborly, even elegant. What should be a road-block operates more like a square roundabout of unstopping traffic, waves, thumbs-ups, and shouts of “Good afternoon!”

Power lines lay limp along the narrow shoulder. Pedestrians step on them as they try to squeeze by on the tight mountain roads. There hasn’t been power on most of the island for about two months now, and even in early November the rumors are that it won’t really be back until Christmas at the earliest. (As of early January, more than 90 percent of the islands had power.) Our fifteen-passenger van slows down to squeeze beneath a fallen power pole that crosses over the road at a steep angle. Its underside is splintered where vehicles have scraped past. We make it by, only banging into it lightly. The taxi sign that once topped the van was knocked off weeks ago.

As we drive up a slope, our van’s engine sings a song of discontent. Bright blue tarps cover the seats. Long strips of duct tape meant to keep those tarps in place peel off and stick to our clothing. Around the tight corner of one narrow neighborhood road, we pull up to the house of the day. It sits atop spindly legs of cinder block, a loose pile of drywall and wood trim in the front yard. We pour out, carrying hammers and pry bars. I watch my coworkers, looking for the most confident one. I follow her into the house.

From the front door I can see straight through to the back wall of the house. Twisted metal studs, floating electrical boxes. Yesterday’s crew pulled out much of the drywall, its surface a Jackson Pollock of dark-green mold. They had marked six feet up from the ground and dragged a box cutter across the sheets, hoping the water hadn’t damaged any higher. Beneath that line, with hammers, fists, and crowbars, they tore through the walls and chipped the drywall to the ground. Dust hangs in the air like a haze, settling on arm hair like construction-grade dandruff.

Our crew picks up where they left off. People climb ladders to hack at drywall wedged behind door frames, pull screws from studs, and push brooms to try to control the constant shower of debris. I stand in the middle of the room, covered in protective gear, trying to figure out what to do. About fifteen feet up the wall of the living room, a foot from the arch of the ceiling, I see a piece of mail stuck to the wall, its envelope high on the







opposite wall. The water definitely went higher than six feet.

An hour into our work, Ashley Midgett, the All Hands project coordinator in charge of the five muck-and-gut crews, strides through the front door. Her long blond hair is pulled into a messy bun behind her expressionless face. Volunteers pause mid-swing, hammers poised above crumbling drywall, when she enters. She greets the homeowner, and the two walk through the house. Ashley flashes a light between the sheets of plasterboard on each wall, hoping for good news where there hasn't been much.

It's worse than she thought. Mold. She cuts a few small holes in previously untouched walls to look behind the boards, hoping they might have escaped. But nothing did. Mold is what does in so many of the houses. It can look innocent, a white powder speckling all the way up the inside of the drywall, but you can't get it off. Every single wall has to come down, floor to ceiling. The bathrooms will have to be ripped out.

The homeowner stands in the living room, eyes wide, not saying much. She goes back outside, sits on the porch and looks at the growing pile in her front yard, a house turned inside out like a salted slug. She pulls her Iowa ball cap down over her eyes. Barbra, a mother from Santa Fe, starts pulling out drawers in the bathroom, dumping the contents into a black trash bag: brushes, soaps, toiletries. Suddenly a muffled scream whumps through her respirator. A rat lunges toward her from a bag of clothespins. It's bigger than a squirrel. It bounces off the floor beside her and scampers into a darker corner of the bathroom.

The homeowner turns toward the door as Barbra rushes out. Another volunteer carries the drawer behind her. The mother rat left a nest of babies, each no bigger than a thumb, tangled together. "Rats?" the owner says. She sounds horrified and mortified.

In 2017, All Hands sent 4,300 volunteers to communities around the world.



She's never had rats in her house. Her house never looked like this, never had holes in the floor, blown-out windows, doors that don't close. She looks toward the neat pile of things she's trying to save on the kitchen counter—a stack of plates, trash bags full of dry clothing, their patterns pressing through the overstretched white plastic, kitchen appliances packed away in their cardboard boxes. Then she looks over the tip of her nose at the squirming pile of flesh, leans away, and murmurs, "Rats." She doesn't want them to come back.

I step forward, tightening the work gloves around my wrists, and carefully lift the baby rats out of the drawer. I pile them together in a small plastic cup, and walk out to the driveway with one of our shovels, wishing I had ear plugs.

**AFTERNOON. A THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY** lifts a sledge hammer over his head again and again and again, letting its heavy head fall upon the things that once made up his life. His name is Tyreek. His white T-shirt hangs off his broad shoulders, his cheeks are thick with the last of the baby fat that he'll shed in his next growth spurt. He's in eighth grade. We smash everything into pieces small enough to stack in a corner of his front yard.

Tyreek takes a swing with all he's got, and the hammer bounces off the corner of a living room end table. His palms sting and he rubs his hands together, the sledge handle leaning against his hip. Another volunteer walks over to hand Tyreek a pair of leather work gloves, which he pulls on and raises the sledge over his head again. The corner of the table crumples beneath its fall.

In the small front yard, volunteers zip thick white Tyvek suits over their shoulders so only a small moon of their face shows, then squeeze their feet into rubber boots that look like they're for clamming. The house is full of standing water and whatever lies beneath its surface. A litter of puppies runs around outside, dart-

ing between rubberized legs. The father dog gives chase with a bum foot. Tyreek and I swing our hammers at a pair of mold-covered bar stools. He's not very talkative, but he smiles a little after a good hit.

His father stands on the driveway, a luckless smile on his face. He's tall and thin. His face is gaunt, cheeks sunken in, a look that his wandering unfocused eyes only intensify. Every so often he takes a pull from the bottle in his hands, the green glass just poking out of the spiral of brown paper held tight by condensation and sweat. "I'm getting sentimental. It's hard to watch everything you own ripped out of your house," he says. He tries to smile while he says this, a smile he must have plastered on weeks ago, something to help him survive and be strong in front of his son. But as he speaks he looks at memory after memory dragged out of his house, his head shakes side to side. Tyreek slams his hammer through a stack of four plastic chairs. White shards fly through the air, ping-pong off the hard hats of a pair of volunteers who wrestle

I ASK JEFF HOW LONG HE'S BEEN HERE. HE'S NOT SURE, HE SAYS. HE COUNTS TIME IN HOUSES, NOT DAYS, AND HE'S IN THE DOZENS.

a rain-heavy mattress to the top of the pile. Tyreek smiles, big.

A few volunteers sit down for a break and unzip the front of their suits, overexertion on their faces. You always hope you don't have to put on the suit. The first time you pour out the sweat that collects in the bottom of the rubber boots is unnerving. Tyreek and I pull plastic water bottles from the bottom of a cooler. He drinks his quickly, silently. Like all eighth graders, he gives only a few short replies when asked about school.

Dark clouds approach, running parallel to the ocean. It'll be a warm rain, but more rain nonetheless. We rush to load power tools back into the van, unused saws and drills, then buckets and buckets of hand tools scrubbed with bleach to kill those things we didn't bring with us. Tyreek tells me not to worry, the real rains come up from the ocean. He walks under the eave of the garage next to his father.

We've done all we can for the day. A few volunteers walk over to Tyreek and shake his hand, then his father's. The man still smiles, because it looks like he doesn't know what else to do or say to these good people, who came from the mainland to demolish and haul away the walls that used to surround him as he awoke each morning, dressed, made breakfast, sent Tyreek off to school. He looks at each of us, intensity in his eyes, searching for words, saying none.

Then, as we turn to walk back toward the van, he says, "You guys got to get back here sometime for a barbecue."

**YOU HAVE TO MEET EVERYONE TWICE**, once with all of the work gear on, and again when everyone looks human. You match each voice to the quarter of a face you interacted with all day. These exchanges at the end of the day are initiated with half nods and tentative smiles.

I am curious about these people. I am here on assignment, as a writer who has come to see what happens when, after the destruction of a storm, people show up and try to be useful. But these people left their lives, spent their own money to come down here to work eight hours a day, six days a week. Instead of being content texting \$10 to the Red Cross like the rest of the country, they packed a bag. I wasn't sure this much goodwill was left in the world. So I want to know them a little, and right now, they're all going to a bar.

The volunteers call it Yellow Bar, for its offensive paint, the color of a banana right before it gets its first brown spots. Reggaeton plays through a set of speakers, drowning out the hum of the generator that powers them and the halogen lights near the grill. There are battery-powered lanterns on the out-

door bar, useful for visits to the dark bathroom.

A volunteer named Jeff, around fifty, sits next to me on the high stools. He's not wearing the dark sunglasses and sleeveless shirt from the worksite. I ask him how long he's been here. He's not sure, he says. He counts time in houses, not days, and he's in the dozens. He's big into fishing and has the pulled, tawny skin of someone who spends his time in the sun. He finished

building his dream home on the Jersey Shore just before Hurricane Sandy ripped it apart. He lived in FEMA housing for a while. That's why he's here. He knows what it's like, he says.

Locals dance between the wooden picnic tables, and a few of them try to snag volunteers as they walk by. These are sweet and awkward exchanges. The volunteers didn't know how to help, but they arrived anyway, and the residents don't know how to say thank you, so they invite them to future barbecues or grab their elbows for a dance. There is gratitude on both sides. Thank you for helping. Thank you for letting us help.

"Remember everybody, the food up here is free and for everyone, so come up and get some," the DJ says over the heavy beat, pointing to a folding table covered in metal trays of chicken wings. Then he stops the music. "Everyone, where are the All Hands volunteers?" The volunteers around me let out a shout. "Well, this gentleman here wants to put \$100 toward your tab for the good work you're doing here, thank you!" Beside him stands an enormous man, thick in the chest, a well-groomed beard pointing down to a pair of sunglasses hanging at his collar. He shakes hands with a few volunteers. You can't hear what they're saying, but everyone is smiling. Someone walks by carrying six beers to the cheering table. It feels like a neighborhood block party.

**AFTER MY THREE DAYS** on the *Grand Celebration*, All Hands finds a new home for us, closer to our work. We leave Mr. Chicago for the reception hall of the Holy Family Catholic Church in Tutu, a neighborhood that winds its way up the top of the mountain across from Little Krum Bay. The ship had its virtues—the room-cleaners, the drink-deliverers—but this suits us better. Forest-green Red Cross cots are lined up in neat rows, each in the middle of a duct-tape square beneath the glass chandeliers on the high ceiling. Fifteen box fans hum throughout the room. I hope they'll drown out any snoring. A few volunteers pull out bundles of paracord and throw them over the high rafters to make laundry lines.

We keep our tools in the church's basement, next to photos of priests in dark robes and silver crosses, on janky shelves made from two-by-twos and pallets. Hammers, sledges, a few different shovels, brooms, a pile of trash bags that reaches up to my neck, box cutters, duct tape, reciprocating saws, circular saws, drills, screwdrivers, chainsaws, a massive demo saw with a great spinning wheel that looks like it came off a BattleBot.

Gumbs, a local police officer, patrols our campus all night,

HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN THE NEXT RECOVERY

**AMERICORPS** ([nationalservice.gov/programs/ Americorps](http://nationalservice.gov/programs/ Americorps)): Along with organizing regional Conservation Corps and Disaster Response Teams, AmeriCorps also offers long-term service programs around the country. Volunteering comes with a housing stipend and, because it's a government group, you can defer your student loans and apply for education grants while in the program.

**HABITAT FOR HUMANITY** ([habitat.org](http://habitat.org)): You can always volunteer locally, but Habitat also offers home-building trips around the world. Just pay the set donation amount.

**CONVOY OF HOPE** ([convoyofhope.org](http://convoyofhope.org)): The organization sent groups of ten to 20 to help distribute goods and perform cleanup in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, and continues to offer a range of service opportunities.





every night. He smiles as he does his rounds, a Yankees cap on his head, his handgun bulging out the side of a skin-tight T-shirt. The church feels safe, but you have to be ready for everything. Outside on the street, dark under the powerless streetlights, cars rattle past, rat rods and motorcycles barking out their exhaust, small cars with bass that cuts through conversation. A group of kids, racing downhill on bicycles, laughing and screaming, cutting between cars, leaves a wake of long honks. Any street in any city.

**DARRYL IS THE PASTOR** of another church, the Church of the Apostles' Doctrine, in the neighborhood next to Tutu. He built this church. It took six years. After the storms, when the church was spared, he opened it up to other islanders, not just his parishioners. Everyone needs a place to stay. His wife cooks for all the people—their son Nathan says she's best at cooking in bulk. When her children came together, some from the islands, others from the mainland, to help with the cleanup, they decided to have Thanksgiving early. In addition to her family, she fed the holiday dinner to most of the people staying at the church, and some of the National Guard, too. She didn't like seeing them eating MREs all the time.

At Darryl's house, a giant truck tilts its bed upward and begins to slide a dumpster down onto the street. The dumpster pauses midair, too big to be so high, and one of the workers runs out to pull a power line out of the way. He grips it with both hands and leans back sharply, wrestling the unwieldy wires, thick as soup cans, out of the way. Dumpsters are hard to come by on the island, but Darryl has lived in the neighborhood for a long time, and he knows people. He waves as the truck drives away.

Darryl's roof sits in his backyard. The back wall of his house is a hole. Wood veneer panels peel off the hallway walls like the husks of a giant coconut. We move into the house, Darryl walking ahead of us with a white washcloth draped over his head against the light rain. As he makes his way gingerly down the hall, he points to a few things he hopes we can save—a pink bicycle, the bed frame in the master bedroom, then a long pause followed by... nothing. By the end of the day the dumpster men will be back, twice, to take away a full dumpster and leave a new one.

**NATIONAL VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS ACTIVE IN DISASTER** (*nvoad.org*): Tell VOAD your skills and where you'd like to go. The organization serves as a hub for other active volunteer groups and can place you with one that needs help.

After assessing the damage, volunteers begin collecting the wreckage of homes into manageable piles before carrying it all to a waiting dumpster.

Nathan stands out front beside bright purple flowers that look too delicate to have withstood the storm. He points to the low houses that surround his father's in the tight neighborhood. Some look better than others. Some don't even have tarps to cover their open eaves. "They're staying with that family over there," he says. "And they're staying with that family over there." A car rolls by slowly, and the driver waves. "People are different here than on the mainland. They say hello to each other, they don't complain. You can complain all you want, but the Home Depot isn't going to get building supplies any faster."

We save what we can. One volunteer walks toward Nathan with a drawer full of dry papers, but before he gets to him Nathan tells him to just throw it all away. In the wall-less back room, children's toys cover the bed and spill onto the floor beside it. I pick up a small suitcase to take to the dumpster. Beneath it, I see a single, undamaged, wallet-size photo. In it, a small boy leans against a young woman, unaware of the world in which they now find themselves. Their smiles are bright and easy. I carry it with care in open hands, like the Eucharist, across the yard, and offer it to Darryl and Nathan. They hold it in their hands, together.

**AT NIGHT, THE DAY'S EXHAUSTION** spreads out onto the Holy Family's balcony. Groups move and grow, loose cliques that flex and change. The volunteers are data analysts and students, paralegals and retirees. One man says he was disgusted with the government response to the hurricanes so he told his bosses that he was leaving for a couple of weeks. "Not asked, told," he says. With a plastic cup of wine in his hand and Texas on his feet, another volunteer complains about his job in insurance. He wonders how he can convince his wife to walk away from the office with him. One woman says she knows the value of life after seeing members of her family struggle with Huntington's disease. All she wants is to leave a good mark on the world.

Sherry Buresh leads the All Hands volunteers for all projects in the U.S. She calls it the Traveling Disaster Circus, a circus she's led for fifteen years. She sits on the balcony of the church, smoking one long Virginia Slim after another. The mosquitoes don't bother her, even when she sleeps. When a disaster

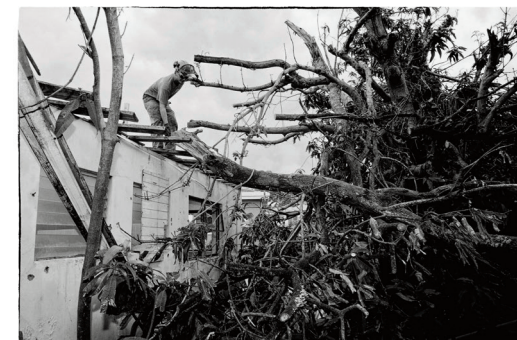
hits, Sherry wants to be standing among the wreckage, near the most underserved people, within twenty-four hours. In the middle of chaos, she knows how to survey an area to figure out what's needed and how many people it'll take. Then she finds a place for them to stay and finds people who can teach them the skills they'll need.

Earlier in the day, a group of volunteers demolished a preschool that had been standing unconvincingly. They pulled out bag after bag of children's toys, a mush of crayon drawings, and child-size furniture. They moved to the corners of the roof, dumped out a spaghetti of yellow rope from a Home Depot bucket and tied it from the roof to the rear bumper of a van driven by a local cabbie named Sonny. One volunteer fell and landed palm-first on an upturned nail. She had to go find a National Guardsman for a tetanus shot and then kept going. From beneath a Philadelphia Eagles hat that matched the fading bumper stickers all over his van, Sonny slowly pushed on the gas, engine revving, as the building leaned even further before lurching forward and collapsing. Dust rose up to take its place.

Later we tore into the pile of debris and timber, hoping to sort the recyclable metal from the reusable wood. One of the volunteers, a United pilot, stopped for a moment to point up at passing planes, naming their make, model, the type of engines. He has a nephew in preschool, he said. When he and I talk about the work that night, his voice catches. You work at these sites and you see yourself, your family, your parents, your kids.

"You can't help everyone," Sherry says under the darkening sky. Long drag. "But you can help that one, and that one." Exhale. "Watching them go from tears of despair and not knowing what they're going to do, and knowing you've made

Chainsaw crews work carefully to untangle a fallen tree from a resident's otherwise inaccessible home and backyard.



even a little difference to make their life better—it's what keeps me going." She lights another cigarette, pulls it in deep, looks up, and wanders off toward her cot.

**NOAH, AN ARBORIST AND VOLUNTEER** from Maine, hands a man named Gary a pole saw. He gives Judith, another team member, an enormous chainsaw with "Big Willie" Sharpied across its top. Judith and Gary are from the Texas Conservation Corps, a disaster-response team. They work in tandem with All Hands. Noah picks up the smaller chainsaw, this one scrawled "Short Stop."

As we walk up the concrete steps to the back of the house, Noah pulls out his vape, which smells like Cap'n Crunch. When All Hands heard he wanted to come down and volunteer, they tried to get him on the next flight, because there are far more downed trees than there are volunteer chainsaw experts. He's quiet, with an often-expressionless face made even more so by sunglasses that cover half of it. We step over the gable that lies across the stairs of the house. Nails stick up toward our boots.

Gary moves nimbly through the mess of each worksite, his black ponytail swinging behind him—he's an avid rock climber back home. Judith recently got her master's in German studies but signed up for a year of disaster response. A red bandanna keeps her hair back under her orange Stihl hard hat—I can't decide if the look is more Rosie the Riveter or Tupac. Noah stands in the backyard, saw at his side, a slight grimace on his face. The wind cleaved off the highest and thickest branches of a thirty-foot tree, leaving jagged wooden spires, like the rack of a giant deer, pointing toward the sky. The massive branches, some as thick as a man's torso, didn't fall far. Most rest on, or are tangled in, the canopy of lower limbs, each no thicker than my wrist. Hundreds of pounds, barely held in the air, jitter in the breeze.

I want to dive in, to grab a chainsaw and start ripping through the green timber, which is probably why Noah, who wears bright orange protective chaps, doesn't give me one. "I like being more scientist than cowboy," he says. He steps toward the tangle, shuffling small branches from beneath his feet until he finds sure footing. He raises the chainsaw and begins trimming one branch at a time, watching how the rest of the wood reacts to each cut. The chain, sharpened by hand each night, whips around the bar. The engine screams, shaking slightly, as the bar pulls through the wood. Noah pauses and steps back to yank on one of the branches. Then he steps forward to cut again. Satisfied, he shuts off the chainsaw and directs the worksite like a field

**SAMARITAN'S PURSE** (*samaritanspurse.org*): This Christian group responds to disasters in the U.S. and abroad.





commander, pausing occasionally to pull on his vape.

One of the biggest logs leans on the roof near the only unbroken window. Noah moves around the backyard looking for any angle that might give him insight into how it will fall once free. He moves toward the tree, starts the chainsaw, and begins cutting. The chain moves easily through the wood. The rest of us are frozen, waiting for the great fall. When the log has only a few inches left, Noah pauses to look over the branch. He puts the bar back in for the last few inches and cleaves the branch in two. The branch falls quickly, wood cracking beneath it, picking up speed, until one end catches firmly on the overhanging eave and the other slows to a halt, caught by the soft hands of viny branches. Unlike the rest of the demolished roof, the eaves are strong. The log is stuck. We have to go cowboy. The four of us arrange a rope around the branches and use it to pull the log down off the roof in a lopsided tug of war. The window doesn't even break.

The chainsaw crews are often the first to arrive at a site. Heads pop out of windows and doorways as the two-stroke engines roar to life in each neighborhood. Near the end of our job, there was a stir from the house next door, "Good afternoon!" yelled a man in a white T-shirt on the second-floor balcony. We waved up to him with our gloved hands. "Thanks for the work you guys are doing!" We weren't even working on his house, but before we could reply, he disappeared through a screen door and returned balancing four cold bottles in his hands. He tossed a couple down to Judith and me, the other two up to the roof to Gary and Noah, then disappeared back into his home.

**ON MY LAST FULL DAY IN TUTU,** I walk past a house like the others: blue tarp over the roof, a car with smashed windows parked out front. An American flag flutters on a pole at the corner of the house. The bottom three stripes have torn free from the grommets. Each waves independently of the rest of the flag. "Good afternoon!" comes a call from the porch. I hadn't seen the man sitting there—the owner, is my guess. It looks like he is melting into his chair, only the crop of thinning bleach-white hair atop his head differentiating him from the back and arms of his seat. We both raise our hands in greeting before I move on to find a bite to eat.

A folding tent on stilts, the kind you might find yourself standing under at a tailgate, sits at the corner of the street. Two folding tables beneath it overflow with bananas, plantains, limes, a pile of gnarled ginger. "Good afternoon," I say to the woman sitting behind the tables.

"Are you from the cruise ship?" she asks.

I'm confused for a quick minute. I stammer, almost saying yes, then no, before I understand: A few days before, the first actual tourist-filled cruise ship since the storms pulled into Havensight Pier near Charlotte Amalie. The return of the lifeblood. People to buy her plantains.

"No," I tell her. "I'm staying with some friends."

I've seen this first wave of tourists roaming about, here to see the island, to buy rum and dig their feet in the sand, to see if the beaches are still the same. To get stories and pictures of shocking ruins to share with their friends. They buy gifts for the folks back home, then rush back to the ship for cocktail hour, where their own Mr. Chicago will announce the night's activities.

That afternoon, the team stands in what's left of a house

**"IT'S ALMOST SO MUCH YOU WANT TO PACK UP AND GO AWAY," DIANA SAYS AS WE FILL TRASH BAGS. "BUT THIS IS OUR HOME."**

that straddles the high ridge of the island. Down either side, the calm blue ocean meets the equally blue and cloudless sky at the horizon. A pleasant breeze keeps us cool. Diana, the owner, stands on top of her bedroom door, its honeycombed core oozing onto the floor of what used to be her kitchen. A blue FEMA tarp stands in for the missing roof overhead. As the sun shines through it a haze of blue falls upon everything, even the roaches the size of Almond Joys that scatter out of the piles of debris.

Diana moves about the house, too short to grab the broken things she sees atop her cupboards from across the room. Her frilly shirt, tights, and shoes with the heels stamped down are all black. She looks at everything over the top of her small glasses. She and her roommate, Jane, painted the walls of their house just a few months ago, covering up the "baby-poop" brown that the previous owner had all over the house. The paint flakes off now, great rubbery swatches falling, like everything else, to the sludge-covered floor.

"It's almost so much you want to pack up and go away. But this is our home," Diana says as we fill trash bags. With her hands on her hips and a wisp of hair sticking to her face as it pokes out from a short-brimmed black cap, she scans the room: "Don't go looking in the trash if you think you threw it out already, but if you see a black Croc that looks like this"—she raises a single shoe above her shoulder.

I had seen that Croc. I remembered kicking it out of my way as I looked over my shoulder, walking backward down slicked steps carrying a mildew-green couch out to a debris pile. I sneak out of the kitchen and down to the trash heap. The Croc isn't near the couch anymore, so I start untying black trash bags, digging through waterlogged books whose covers peel off and stick to one another. Jane told me some of the books' characters came to her in a dream, asking why she hadn't saved them.

I finally see it, under some palm fronds. I walk back into the kitchen, sidestepping another volunteer using a snow shovel to scoop up broken glass and mud. Triumphant, I raise it overhead.

Diana jumps into the air clapping. She holds both shoes together in front of her, not seeing anything else. She actually twirls around and says to no one and everyone, "I just feel like there is a weight off my shoulders." A long pause, and then: "Before it seemed insurmountable, now it seems manageable."

She places both shoes on a modest pile of potentially salvageable things in the corner—a few bar stools, plastic bins that floated atop the rising water, a folded-up ab machine. She walks into her bedroom and sits on the edge of her moldy bed beside a few stretched-out dresses she hopes to save. She lets out a long breath, one that's been in there a while. She rises to her feet, walks back out into the living room, picks up a fresh, black trash bag, and shakes it open.

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