

On the ground in Puerto Rico: Alfred University alumnus reports **Things are bad here**

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Edgard Rivera-Valentin '08
returns to Alfred every
summer to teach at the
Astronomy Camp

“The devastation from Maria was intense,” reports Edgard Rivera-Valentin '08. A staff planetary scientist at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, Rivera-Valentin has been able to communicate, sporadically, through Facebook since disaster struck his island home two weeks ago on Sept. 20.

“Things are bad here,” Rivera-Valentin reported earlier this week. “The bulk of the island is without utilities (water, power) and communications (Internet, cell phones, landlines.) The devastation was intense. Trees are left barren. What was once a beautiful green island now looks dead.”

His father works in search-and-rescue in the city of Arecibo, which is located on the northern coast of Puerto Rico, about an hour-and-a-half west of San Juan. Rivera-Valentin says the “death toll being reported are drastically underrepresenting the issue. “A few days ago, (my father) retrieved some 50 corpses. The morgues have requested help from the government because they are filled.”

Much of the country is without electrical power, and estimates are that it will take four-to-six months to restore it, he said. “That means much of the island will be without water” for the same amount of time because the “pumps to bring the water to the middle of the island won’t be working.”

Diesel fuel and gasoline are “precious” now, he said. “People are waiting six hours to get 10 gallons or less.” Even though the governor has said that gas stations can no longer limit how much gas or diesel people can get at one time, many people don’t have the cash to buy more. He explained the lack of communications means that the island is operating on a “pure cash economy.” Banks are now limiting withdrawals to \$100 a day, and the lines at the banks are “also four hours long.”

The observatory where he works sustained damage, he said. “The line feed antenna broke and several panels” from the dish were damaged as well. “Right now the limiting factor to continued operations to fix the observatory is diesel. Our current supplies will last through this Wednesday (Oct. 4), but after that, we’ll lose power and water and have to

close.”

Rivera-Valentin said the Universities Space Research Association (USRA), which is one of the not-for-profit agencies that operate the observatory, has established a GoFundMe page to help observatory staff directly. Funds collected will be distributed by USRA to the staff for “qualified” payments, including emergency needs, medical care, home repair, etc. resulting from the hurricane.