

Interview: Stephanie Padilla is a social justice activist in Puerto Rico

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After the resignation of Governor Roselló in Puerto Rico on July 24th, 2019, it was easy to find people posting messages on social media expressing how proud they were feeling of Puerto Rico and of their compatriots. What exactly caused such feelings of pride?

It was the first time we were seeing a country so united about something other than sports and beauty pageants. I think we all have been able to experience how Puerto Rico gets together when we are participating in a sport competition, as was the case, for example, with the Team Rubio movement in 2017, or whenever one of our Miss Universes wins. Yet we had never seen this kind of togetherness with the purpose of exerting changes in our country. It was the first time that I saw people of all ages, with diverse political ideologies, different lifestyles, etc get together to say “No more!”

I was at a foodcourt at the mall, some time after the governor had announced his resignation, and I overheard a conversation among three women between the ages of sixty and seventy who were chatting, approvingly, about the peaceful protests. And in Old San Juan, one weekend after the event, a band was playing at Plaza Colón and in-between songs they spoke about the results of the protests to the enthusiastic applause of everybody present. What was it like to watch so many people from different

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walks of life and generations supporting the protests?

It is the most pleasant memory I have of these protests: it was a collective expression of our indignation. We were firm in our purpose: the governor had to resign.

How did it feel to be there on the street as a participant of the protests? What were you seeing around you? What was the general sentiment amongst the participants?

It is difficult to describe the euphoria that we felt being there, the pride we felt. What you saw and heard around you were people in the midst of a noble fight. It didn't matter the intensity of the heat that day, or how tired you were. The rain didn't matter, and neither did the tear gas thrown at us... We kept standing there because we were very clear that we wouldn't leave until Ricardo [Roselló] would announce his resignation.

What do you think moved people this time?

Most people I came across had spent years suppressing feelings of anger against the constant abuses they have received from the part of the various governments that we've had in Puerto Rico. And that chat that was published was, for many people, like the drop that flooded the cup. I think we just wrapped ourselves in courage after [hurricane] María. After the hurricane we spent long months without electricity services, without water, spending our time on what seemed like kilometeric queues, really long queues just to get some food or gasoline, for instance. That took away any fear we might have had. There was no longer any way to manipulate us either by talking about tourism or about truck drivers not allowing gasoline to be handed to people — by then we had lived through everything and even worse things than that.

Now, after the resignation of the governor of Puerto Rico, how do you feel about your role as an activist?

I feel extremely proud to have been a part of history in the making, which is what this was, and to see how countries in Latin America see us now as an inspiration for them to fight against corruption in their respective countries.

At a more individual level, more than a month after the resignation of the governor, what do you see as the meaning of what transgressed? Do you understand it as a personal accomplishment?

I feel it as a collective achievement. This would never have happened had all of Puerto Rico not gotten united and, in fact, I think that's why it had never happened like it did this time. [More than 500,000 are said to have marched for the cause of the governor's resignation.] To me, this means from now on, our Pueblo will make itself be respected; it knows it is us who have the power really.

Do you feel more courageous now as a person? Did participating in a peaceful protest that resulted in the resignation of the governor of your country make you feel in any way more courageous in your daily life, in your personal life?

Definitely. I think this serves as a motivating force for the entire country about what can be done and accomplished when we set aside our differences and work together for a greater, common good.

What do you see as the role of social media outlets in this time of history: do these venues merely spread information about what can be just and noble causes, or do you feel that they serve, in a more significant way, as a trigger, a point of origin, a pushing force, or perhaps a mechanism that allows a campaign for social justice to evolve into action?

For me social media was our biggest ally. Instead of just consuming and seeing what the news outlets thought we should consume and see, we were witnessing what was really happening on the streets thanks to what people there were posting on social media, the anecdotes they shared. This showed everyone that the protests were not vio-

lent, as some people had wanted us to believe at times. The result of that was that even more people ended up joining the protests. Moreover, people were usually convoked or summoned through the web, and even singers and other pop artists made their calls through social media in order to reach many people.

Did the peaceful protests during the month of July, which have been named, collectively, as "Furia de verano 2019" (The Fury of Summer 2019), serve to define or redefine what being Puerto Rican means to you? Did this event, in any way, change your cultural identity?

I usually participate in marches and protests, so I am used to hearing some people say these events are for "socialists" or for "those hairy students from Iupi". [Iupi is the nickname given to the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus, which historically has served as the center for important public discussions about social issues affecting society at large]. You could always hear people saying, "if only we could see the reason behind the fight and work together, everything would be different," and this time I had the opportunity to live that. This time, for the first time, we stopped being only the "pelús" [hairy people] from the Iupi in order to become "Puerto Rico."

When you were on the streets, singing, marching, participating, what was in your mind about what you were doing?

I was defending our island and giving voice to those 4,645 people who could no longer be with us after hurricane María, and whom were the subject of mockery by those who were in power. I was doing justice to all those people who should still be here with us.

What do you fathom is the repercussion or transcendence of the Furia de verano 2019 protests and its results? Did it feel like a victory and why?

We succeeded to take the power away from a corrupt governor and we achieved this peacefully. There were no deaths involved, and it served to show that the power truly is ours. I think this will stand as an example for future generations that unity is possible.

We didn't give up at any moment. There were marches and protests in San Juan and along different parts of the island. We never surrendered and we accomplished the goal.

What do you think is the effect on the psychological and emotional health of the country that its governor, one of the most powerful persons in a country, and someone who was placed in his position of power by the people, was made to resign by the people?

I think it affects the health of a country in a positive way because the solidarity and union that you notice around you shows you that you are not the only person feeling in a particular way. That validation of your feelings, that sense of not being alone, I see as having a positive impact in mental health.

Is what took place in Puerto Rico in any way related to the pursuit of human rights in other parts of the globe? For example, the pursuit of gender equality?

I think it is. The protest had participants from very diverse communities, including the LGBTQ+ community, La Colectiva Feminista, amongst many others, all of whom were demanding the respect that every human being deserves.

How did these events impact your desire to become a physician and what can you do as a medical doctor?

When I read the mockery going on on the governor's chat, I felt so much ire, and a lot of pain too. I have witnessed, first hand, people who have so many needs and who have lost everything. In this case the people who were supposed to help them were the ones who were doing the least of that. I think that has motivated me to continue on this career path and see how many people there are in need to whom I can be of service.

What was most impactful about the actions of the governor, before his resignation, in addition to the fact that members of his cabinet were arrested for corruption in both the departments of health and education?

I think the mockery about the cadavers at the Forensics office got to me the most. There were so many families suffering, having to wait months

before they retrieved the body of their loved ones, and these people in power were laughing, making fun of that pain. I think there are no words to describe how low someone must be to express themselves in such a way or laugh at something like that.

What did Furia de verano 2019 and the governor's resignation teach you about what moves people to act, to take action in favor of social, just causes?

I learned that this country, Puerto Rico, is determined to not allow government officials to disrespect it in the way that they have been. That is what moves people: defending our rights.

Why do you feel so many Puerto Ricans outside of Puerto Rico felt moved as well to march in protest supporting the campaign to have the governor resign and joined the movement from their respective geographical locations in the world, in many cases, creating peaceful protests of their own?

Most Puerto Ricans left the island because of lack of opportunities here but when they saw how united we were for this cause, when they saw that it is possible to set aside our differences, I think that gave them a reason for hope that they can return someday. Boricuas are Boricuas no matter where we are, and the immense pride I felt to see the amount of people participating in the protests is probably the same pride people from the diaspora felt. So they found ways to be a part of this chapter in our collective history, even from outside of the island.

What does solidarity mean for you? Has that definition changed now?

Solidarity is something I experienced in the aftermath of hurricane María. We all shared what little we had just to help each other. I believe Puerto Rican people are human beings who are very kind and who have a strong sense of solidarity, but sometimes it takes adversity for us to realize it.

Right now, parts of the Amazon are on fire, even the Arctic. There are wars, corruption, assassinations, and utter displays of racism in many parts of the globe. Does this victory, in any way, change your perspective about the

world, or the meaning you give to your life and the activities you believe are worth an effort?

Sometimes you feel that every day there are things happening around you that make it not worth to go on, but these small victories give you the motivation to continue. You realize that “the good people are more” as we say, and that strength

comes from unity. We can’t quit, we have to go on with the hope that we will see positive changes, and even more, that we can be that change that is needed.

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