

**Testimony of
Ms. Alexandra Precup**

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Committee on Natural Resources
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I would like to thank to Chairmen Cox, the members of the United States Congress, and all the people who made possible for me to be here today.

My name is Alexandra Precup; I am 40 years old from Humacao, Puerto Rico. I have worked as a Chemist, a Kindergarten music instructor, a music teacher & tutor, I have been a business owner, a Realtor and most a Validation Specialist. You may ask, how does a woman prepare to in such a short life to handle such different professions? Or you may wonder if I just cannot make up my mind? What does she want in life?

The truth is that I have not chosen to change and re-invent myself. Life's circumstances have forced me to adapt, to survive for my children, my husband, for my family, my people and until recently for my beloved Puerto Rico.

When I obtained my bachelor's degree in Chemistry from the University of Puerto Rico, from the University of Mayaguez almost 20 years ago, I thought I would have it made, working in one of the most important sectors of our island's economy, the Pharmaceutical Industry. Because of the implementation in Puerto Rico of Section 936 of the IRS, this industry boomed in Puerto Rico, but the 936 were abolished in the late 90's and as a result, most industries (but particularly the pharmaceuticals) were decimated and the economy crashed and never recovered. The factory where I worked closed.

By the end of the 2000s and the Real Estate Bubble in the US burst our economy in Puerto Rico had a second hit. My husband, ran a family business with more of 30 years of tradition was forced to close operations due to the decrease in sales that became unsustainable after the imposition of sales tax in PR. I was with 8 months pregnant, expecting our first child

We had managed ok in the beginning and we were able to subsist on our savings for almost 2 years. At the time. searching for work was incessant and also unsuccessful. Particularly in my case. There were simply no job opportunities within my field of preparation, not even a job interview. There was no place for a chemist in Puerto Rico's economy. Because my husband ran a family business, the formal economy did not recognize that experience. Despite having a bachelor's degree in business administration and having managed a business of his own, he was rejected. Some considered him without formal experience, others considered him "over qualified". Truth is for decades now, it has been very hard for Puerto Ricans to find work. It was extremely frustrating for us.

But we are resilient people. We do not give up. We decided to do something for that baby who had already been born, and who needed a decent home with at least the basic needs. The government was promoting programs for professionals to reinvent themselves, and we decided to take them up on the offer. Taking advantage of the knowledge of music that I had, and my husband's knowledge in business administration,

we opened a music school. In the face of need giving up was never an option for us. That school became one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Music was the hook to attract people, but the business did so much more for those who arrived. We made it our mission to help every family every individual that came our way. We gave life experiences to children, young people and adults, who could not afford the regular services of the traditional academies. The school did not make us rich but at least we were able to support our family. When the business had grown, enough we decided to diversify our income. My husband stayed managing the music academy and I started real estate studies, obtained my brokerage license and became a realtor. It was very rewarding for us. We were able to turn a tragic economic disaster in the face of the loss of our jobs, not only to re-invent ourselves, but also to use our time to create a positive impact on the lives of the people around us. We did that when so many of our peers were leaving the island to start new lives in Florida and other cities in the USA. We did not want to leave, our humble school and real estate business, was enough for us. It was all that we needed. We believed that our lives were made and realized. We were happy.

On September 20, 2017, everything changed. Hurricane Maria crashed into our lives. All we had experienced several in previous hurricanes including Georges in 1998, one that caused the most havoc and emotional impact on me, all of that was nothing. During Georges, I still lived with my parents in the coastal neighborhood, Punta Santiago in east of the Island in the town of Humacao. The sea made its way inside our house, reaching a foot and a half of water. We had losses but the Puerto Ricans are resilient by nature, working hard and with the help of the government we managed to get ahead in a period of time that back then seemed long but now post-Maria we realize was relatively short.

When we heard that a hurricane 5 was coming to the island, people felt ready, we prepared even better than for Georges. Nobody could imagine a Hurricane worse than Georges, impossible. We were so wrong! As the first gusts of wind began to hit our town, we realized that we were in for a long, long night. At many times that night, I really felt that I was going to die. I have never felt like that in my life.

My husband and I left our home before the storm with our children to pass the emergency in the house of a relative right in front of our building where our academy and our house were located. We could see through a window, how that first blasts of wind destroyed everything we had worked for during the past 10 years, and it was only the beginning. That terrible night, the storm windows for the windows seemed to explode. I had to take shelter with my children in a bathroom, I prepared the bathtub with a quilt and pillows, and I managed to put them to sleep there, so they did not have to witness the fear on our faces. Months after this catastrophic event the memory of everything that happened remains a shock in our hearts. This memory still lingers and will forever haunt our hearts.

The wind ripped off the roof off of half of our house, and most of our businesses' building was also lost. The building that was our main source of income. It seemed that more than a hurricane, we had survived an air raid bombing. Looking at my eldest son with tears in his eyes, as he asked me: Mom, where are we going to live now? It was devastating. It killed my hopes for a better future. We had no water, no electricity, no communications beyond our immediate neighbors, and we could not even get out of the lot where our house was.

We remained isolated and uncommunicated a total of two weeks. We felt abandoned, forgotten. The news that came through the mouths of other people that came to help was horrible. That was when I found out that in my parents' neighborhood of Punta Santiago, the sea had covered more than 15 miles inland and the town square had been flooded by almost 6 feet of water. There were people that passed the hurricane fighting the winds on the roofs of their homes in order to avoid drowning.

When things became normal again, many had to sleep for days or weeks in their cars because we were literally homeless. Can you imagine that? When I learned that, I had to do something. I was part of the leadership of a professional association, the Realtors, we began to distribute aid and saw firsthand the needs of thousands of people who survived that tragedy. Trust me, if my face when seeing the destruction of my house was frozen with sadness, the faces of those people, many of them that I knew since I was a kid, was heart wrenching for me.

We did what we could as far as we could, but I could not ignore my reality any longer. My children were without a safe roof, lost months of school and we were unable to generate any income. The most terrible thing was that this time we did not receive help from the government, not even a blue tent to cover our roof from the rain. A couple of months after the hurricane passed, FEMA gave us \$1000 to pay a month of rent somewhere else, until we fixed our house. I cannot deny that at that moment, my courage was tested many times and my indignation were enormous. How were we supposed to fix our house in a month? The damages were estimated at more than \$ 40,000. We didn't have enough savings to fix it by ourselves and what we had we used to survive the emergency. That was our only option. Buy diesel for the generator; buy some clothes for my children, since all theirs were lost when the house was flooded and at least find a clean bed where my kids could sleep comfortably. We tried little by little to enable the building so we can re-open our school. A friend gave my husband a job, but it was not enough; for the third time I had lost everything. We were faced again with starting over.

We tried for a year. My job as a realtor was not enough to survive, we touched rock bottom. It was frustrating, because through our married life, we had been able to adjust to our reality and move forward. Then even adjusting, it was not in our hands to have a better life. No matter how hard we worked, money did not come to the house. We never lacked food, because we received the help of the food assistance

PAN program at that time, but a human being who has always worked to give his children a better life than the one she had as a child, does not accept living from the government forever.

It was a period of much denial, we did not want to accept the reality that as a family we were facing. We did not want to leave our island where we had lived all our lives and we did not have money to leave either. I could not think of coming to the mainland to work on the real estate, because I knew could not depend on an unstable income, and I thought I was outdated to re-start as a Chemist after so much time out of the industry. Even so, God in his infinite mercy, showed us the way and that road took me to the city of Atlanta. A city, where I did not know anyone, only the person who invited me to go, she was going to be there for two weeks, so I could stay with her. She showed me around, took me to some job interviews and after two weeks I was by my own. So on October 3, 2018, with only \$ 50 in my pocket, I arrived to Atlanta, only hoping that God had something better for me, so I can provide to my family.

Therefore, it was, I came from PR without a return ticket, because I could not pay for it. In fact, to pay for the coming ticket, we had to sell some remaining belongings that survived the hurricane. In those first two weeks, my husband deposited in my account what little he could from selling some articles from the music school that had survived. All the while I attended job interviews. Finally an offer came, an offer that I never expected, that put me in the position of being able to bring up my family from PR, and have a safe home for my kids. That day of last December when I saw my kids coming out of the airport was one of the happiest days of my life in such a long time. Leaving my island without my kids was one of the most terrifying things for me; I did not have the certainty of how long it would be before I would be able to see them again.

So grateful to God, that guided us until we have been able to re-establish. Start over one more time. Many people ask me when I expected to return to PR. My answer is I don't know, "maybe when I am retired". I mean, you do not want to be far from the land where you belong. Puerto Rico is my home. If I could be there and work, I would go back in a minute. What I've always wanted is to be there and be able to work and help other people that could not do it by themselves, but at what expense? I

I have learned that my first and foremost ministry must be to my family. Maybe I can do more to help the people of my island, if I am well enough in all aspects of my life, even though if it is in a distant place. I hope. I will work for that and always hope. My husband and I came back to understand that fighting for your dreams is not worthless, although it means you have to start from scratch again, in a strange and different place.

Never in my life had I thought that I could survive something worse than Hurricane Georges in 98. Maria came into our lives teaching us that Mother Nature can surprise us to the point that we NEVER ever imagine. From my point of view, in a very Puerto Rican way, beyond seeing this as a tragedy, I have begun

to see it; **I needed to see it** as an opportunity. An opportunity to use this tragedy as a spearhead for new and better things in our personal lives. Maybe from Atlanta my voice can be heard in DC. And if I can make a difference so that those who remain surviving in Puerto Rico get the help they need. Maybe that is my purpose. An opportunity to carry a message of resilience and prevention.

Well, if in 1998 we did not think there would be anything worse than Georges, I do not want to think about what could happen if my island gets worse than Maria. Climate change is real, and it is up to us to do something to prevent more lives from being seen negatively affected before these situations. In my case, I can say that although it does cost much suffering, we have been able to see the light. One more time start over again. Sadly, there are still many families suffering, living with no guarantee of what tomorrow might bring. If my voice can be used to raise awareness and hope of a better future to those who are still trying to get back on their feet, well my adventure in Atlanta and now here with you, will have been worth it.

Thank you.