

Puerto Rican Cultural Center Sponsors an Immersive, Educational, Ecotour Covering 11 Towns in Puerto Rico:

By Xiomara Rodríguez

As The Puerto Rican Cultural Center celebrate's its 50th anniversary, we look at the community of Paseo Boricua and Humboldt Park to see so many powerful reminders of the wins this Puerto Rican community has achieved through 50 years of grassroots organizing. There are wins represented by the beautiful Flags of Steel on Division, there are wins represented in each community mural, and there are wins represented in the site for the new Paseo Boricua Arts building. However, there are wins The Puerto Rican Cultural Center has had that members of the community have not seen. Many people do not realize the decades of grassroots organizing and solidarity The Puerto Rican Cultural Center has maintained with those on our beloved island of Puerto Rico. Since the foundation of the Center, organizers in Chicago have stood in solidarity with Puerto Rico to demand the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners, to stop dangerous mining projects on the

island, to expel the U.S. Navy from Vieques, to provide financial, material, and organizing support to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, and most recently to help fund a community resilience center in La Juncia, Comerío, which will provide service to more than 700 people in the event of a hurricane. The facility contains kitchen, laundry, and bathing facilities, all with their own generator. It should be noted as well that in no way was support ever done through charity. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center has always supported efforts led by Puerto Ricans on the island that truly speak to the Center's mission of self determination, self actualization, and self-reliance. To kick off The Puerto Rican Cultural Center Juan Antonio Corretjer's 2-year long Golden Anniversary celebration the Center took a trip to Puerto Rico to connect the Diaspora to the organizations on the island whom we have worked with over the years.

While meeting with our compatriots on the island, we were able to donate nearly \$5,000 to community initiatives in five towns in Puerto Rico (see eco-tour summary immediately



From left: Ralph Cintron (Puerto Rican Agenda), Mayor Josean Santiago, Jose E. López (PRCC)

after.) These donations would not be possible without the generous monetary contributions given to The Puerto Rican Cultural Center by all the people who believe in our work. We want to express our deepest gratitude to those who have made such contributions to our work -without you we could not have done it. We hope to count on your continued generosity.

Puerto Rican Cultural Center Eco Tour Highlights:

The PRCC organized an educational ecotour of Puerto Rico that included 16 participants visiting 11 towns. Between December 15 and 25, the participants were challenged to engage their critical consciousnesses and gain a more profound understanding of the problems and the possibilities confronting Puerto Rico today. Among the topics investigated was a deep look, through a processes of self-actualization, into the grass roots initiatives that address the island's systemic challenges. The highlights of the trip included the following:

- **On Friday, December 17th:** At sunrise we celebrated the traditional Puerto Rican Misa de Gallo, and were graciously hosted by Father Raúl and the congregation of San Andrés de la Montaña Catholic Church in Barranquitas. Afterwards, we attended the inauguration of Comerío's first community resilience center in the community of La Juncia. During the inauguration, The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the Puerto Rican Agenda were honored for their critical support in developing the resilience center (which will serve more than 700 people of La Juncia including laundry, kitchen, and bathroom facilities) and in providing aid to the community post Hurricane Maria. For lunch we were treated to lechón



Welcome Parranda in Comerío

asado en la barrita at an incredible project in Comerío offering alternative education to students in Puerto Rico who have been pushed out of the Puerto Rican public high school system. The school is located on a 20-acre farm that provides students with creative engagement in culinary arts, visual arts, and other vocational skills. We were then taken to a housing and educational center for abandoned children with physical challenges from ages 0-5. After visiting the school, the delegation made its way to the plaza of Comerío where we were welcomed by an amazing parranda Comerieño, which was followed by the initiation of the Annual Festival Jíbaro.

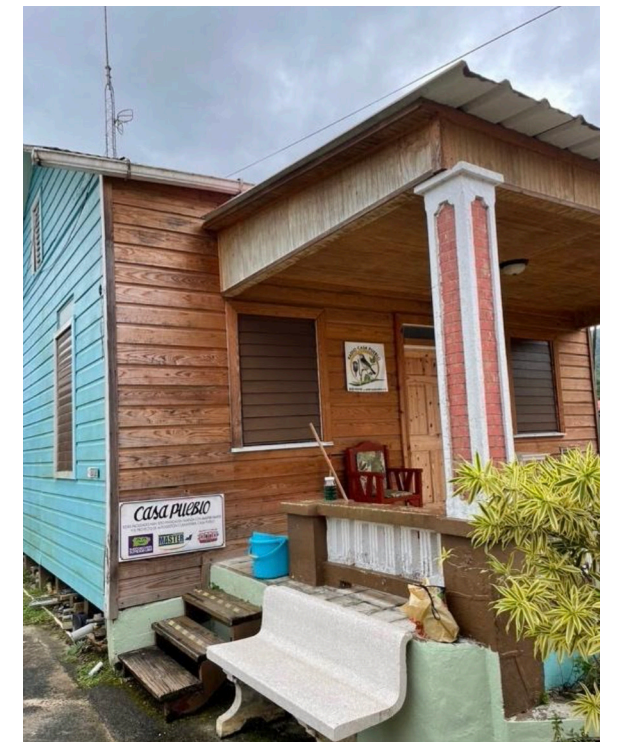
- **On Saturday, December 18th:** The Chicago delegation enjoyed two incredible exhibits by Antonio Martorell and Agua, Sol, y Sereno at el Museo de Arte de las Américas in San Juan. Later during the day, we were warmly welcomed by artists: Ana Rivera and Charles Juhasz-Alvarado and given a beautiful tour of La Casa de los Contrafuertes/ a space for local artists that includes workshops, gallery spaces, and a garden.
- **On Sunday, December 19th:** The Chicago delegation was treated to a very special breakfast at the home of Comerío's Mayor Josean Santiago. We witnessed a traditional Santa Misa led by



Los Tres Reyes Magos de Juana Díaz during the Santa Misa in Comerío

Father Pedro in Comerío's Plaza de la Trova: The mass was musically performed by Puerto Rico's legendary musical group la Orquesta Nacional Mapeyé and featured Los Tres Reyes Magos de Juana Díaz. After the misa, we enjoyed Comerío's 41st annual Festival Jíbaro with traditional food, drinks, artisanry, and live music including the island's best trovadores as they competed on the main stage. The festival hosted more than 100 artisans and culminated with an amazing performance by Andrés Jiménez, el Jíbaro.

- **On Monday, December 20th:** We visited the grass roots initiative Casa Pueblo in Adjuntas and learned about the incredible work they are doing to educate and advocate for the Puerto Rican peoples energy independence. We learned about their work to bring solar power to their pueblo, how they provided relief and electricity to their community post Hurricane Maria, how they sustain themselves with the sales of their homegrown coffee (Madre Isla), and how they utilized their solar powered cinema and radio station as a form of therapy/storytelling post Hurricane Maria. After Casa Pueblo, we had lunch with the iconic Puerto Rican artist Anotonio Martorell, and took a tour of his studio in Ponce. During the visit to Ponce our Executive Director and COO were able



Casa Pueblo's Radio Station (Radio Casa Pueblo)

to meet with the Mayor of Ponce, Dr. Irizarry Mora, to discuss Ponce's participation in the 29th Fiesta Boricua in September to represent "Lo Mejor de Nuestros Pueblos, since next year the PRCC will be celebrating its 50th anniversary and our first initiative was the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, and Ponce was the birthplace of the school's namesake.

- **On Tuesday, December 21st:** We took the ferry from Ceiba to the beautiful island of Vieques to meet with the legendary Roberto Rabín and María Pagán in el Fortín to hear them recount their stories of how they fought to get the U.S. Navy expelled from Vieques, and the fight they are continuing to force the U.S. Navy to clean up the toxic waste left after decades of bombing the island. We were treated to a tour of the island from Isabel to Esperanza, Vieques' largest settlements. The group was able to savor some of Vieques' wonderful cuisine.
- **On Wednesday, December 22nd:** We took a deep dive into the complexities of coffee production



Vieques gathering with Myrna Pagán, Roberto Rabin, Luis Rosa, Oscar López Rivera

(Continue on page 12)