

# The Heart of Puerto Rico

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Four months after Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico, Nancy Navales is on a phone interview talking about the storm's aftermath.

Her voice seems not just happy, but hopeful.

She uses words like “resilient.” Her colleagues choose descriptors like “heroic” and “spirited.” And on the other end of that call, from a comfortable chair in an undamaged building, it's hard to imagine how these words apply to an island nearly destroyed last September.

Hundreds lost their lives. Thousands lost their homes. Months after the storm, traffic lights still don't work. Countless businesses remain shuttered. On the day of that call, 40 percent of the island was still without power, and that included Navales' home.

“You start to settle into a new normalcy,” she says. “Everything changes after something like this. But as Puerto Ricans, we bounce back. Ultimately, you get into a rhythm of functioning around these new issues that you face.”

But what comes next? Well, a few hours after that call, power was unexpectedly restored to Navales' home.

And that's where the optimism comes in.

### **The Storm**

For 23 years, Navales has been a team member at Toyota de Puerto Rico (TdPR), Toyota's sales arm on the island, working her way up to her current role of vice president. Like the island itself, Toyota is in her blood.

More than that, the 106 other team members, contingent workers and support staff that make up TdPR are part of her extended family, and she's part of theirs.

So it shouldn't be a surprise that, in the most dire circumstances, TdPR's people joined forces to take on whatever Hurricane Maria left in her wake.

"The storm brought a higher level of anxiety," says Hector Rivera, TdPR's director of sales. "I have been amazed by how many people are reaching out to each other. That happens throughout the whole island. The anxiety has bought some good vibes."

Maria hit on Wednesday, Sept. 20. The next day, a skeleton crew showed up to work at TdPR. That's right, people came in.

By the next Monday, all departments were represented. Just a week after that, TdPR was running at full strength, even as team members brought their children to work because schools were still closed. In a way, the folks at TdPR were lucky. No team members, contingents or support staff were injured by a storm that claimed more than 500 lives. Further, only a few suffered property loss.

Soon, team members began participating in charity efforts to help the island, handing out Thanksgiving dinner to victims and hosting a party, plus handing out supplies, when a local school reopened.

Still, the people of TdPR needed help. So Toyota's Emergency Response Program (TERP) provided team members with funds up to the maximum allotted \$2,500 to replace essential items, while TdPR pitched in an additional \$500 for each person.

Meanwhile, TMNA sent a chartered plane carrying more than 53,000 pounds of supplies to their TdPR brethren.

"Toyota's DNA is to care for people," says Rafael Reyes, TdPR's customer service director. "And this is proof. It's a very humbling and gratifying experience to work for a company that really cares for their people."

About two months after Maria, a group of TMNA executives – including CEO Jim Lentz and Senior Vice President, Automotive Operations Bill Fay – visited TdPR to address team members and bring supplies. Fay was blown away by what he saw.

"They're still coming to work every day," he says. "Still supporting the dealers and the overall Toyota effort. They're helping each other out personally, which has been touching all our hearts. They've persevered and made a very bad situation a positive one for the company and each other."

### **Extended Family**

Indeed, at the same time, TdPR was trying to track down team members, it was scrambling to contact dealers to assess property damage. And that's where TdPR shined during the recovery.

TdPR supports 23 dealers on the main island, and two others in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which were also hammered by Maria. And everyone was in uncharted territory. “This was unprecedented,” Reyes says. “This was the worst storm in 80 years. All of our dealers and the people in our office, none of us had seen anything like this.”

Cell phone towers were down, newspapers couldn’t print. Television wasn’t an option. So TdPR placed ads on the single AM radio station still broadcasting to the island, asking dealers to check in at an 800 number.

If they didn’t hear from a dealer, TdPR team members drove through tarnished streets to make contact in person.

“We tried to make a quick assessment of where they were in terms of their people, their buildings, what kind of damage was on the property from the vehicles to everything else related,” Rivera says. “We put together a snapshot of the major damage and the major hurdles we had to clear.”

As expected, the damage was devastating. TdPR’s 25 dealerships suffered an estimated \$9 million in building and sign damage.

Financially, TdPR gave dealers some relief.

“We provided some support on parts purchases and collections,” Navales says. “We also advanced them some warranty payments.”

Once the island’s citizens began putting their lives back together, customers began trickling into the dealerships. With most stores running on generators, their service lanes began to fill up with damaged vehicles. Many who lost cars showed up seeking to replace them.

And while pent-up demand is normal after a natural disaster, it speaks to the will of the dealers and their employees that they could handle the rush at the same time they were rebuilding their own lives.

“The day after the storm, our dealers were out there sweeping and doing whatever they needed to be ready to help their customers,” Rivera says.

“The dealer sentiment was ‘I have to open for my employees, and I have to take care of my customers,’” Reyes says. “That mindset enabled them to serve customers almost immediately. Many of them by the Monday after the storm.”

Predictably, September and October sales were among TdPR’s worst ever. But November’s 3,112 in sales were the best since 2006. And that was followed by their best December since 2007, moving 3,076 vehicles.

### **Looking Forward**

So here we are, nearly five months after Hurricane Maria left Puerto Rico reeling. Life isn’t back to normal yet. No one knows if it ever will be.

But after all this, those words still ring out: Resilient. Heroic. Spirited. Navales, Rivera and Reyes talk of a people that can’t be defeated by a storm. Of a workforce that will do anything to serve customers in the worst of times. Of dealers who understand that their role in the community goes far beyond selling cars.

“It’s been crazy during the last few months and people want to get back to work, want to contribute and engage, want to have fun,” Navales says. “Holidays were celebrated with or without power. Within all that craziness, it’s clear that Puerto Ricans are the most resilient people I know.”