



*Light and Hope for Puerto Rico*  
**Salvador Gabriel Gomez Colón**  
**Puerto Rico**

On the night of September 20, 2017, nobody slept well on the island of Puerto Rico. Winds gusting at over 150 miles per hour blew across the island, tearing up trees from their roots and whipping debris into the air. Over the course of 24 hours, more than 20 inches of water inundated streets and highways. The electricity went out across the entire island, and everyone, rich and poor, found themselves suddenly in darkness, facing an uncertain future.

That night, as he huddled with his mom and grandparents in the lobby of his apartment building in San Juan, worried about what would happen next, Salvador Gabriel Gomez Colón hoped he would be one of the lucky ones. He could feel his building swaying in the wind. He hoped that the roof wouldn't be torn off, or that the building wouldn't come down completely. "It was definitely the night that I felt the most vulnerable and scared of my life," he says.

When he woke up, there was about six inches of water on the floor of his bedroom and water was seeping through the air conditioning vents. His room was completely waterlogged, and would eventually fill with mold, forcing a remodeling. But the building was intact, and his family was safe. That was what mattered most.

For many this was not the case.

Across Puerto Rico, the dawn of September 21 felt apocalyptic. Entire buildings had been destroyed, reduced to piles of rubble and mud. Knee-deep water flowed through residential streets, making it hard for emergency services to rescue the injured and displaced. Fallen power lines snaked along the roads.

In the northeastern part of the island, where many people had already been living in dire circumstances, ravaged by poverty and neglected by their government, the storm mercilessly pillaged thatched huts, rickety apartment complexes, and neglected homes for the elderly.

Salvador woke up that morning knowing that that day – and the days that would follow – would change his life and the lives of every one of the more than 3 million people who live in Puerto Rico. "There's always one person that's having a worse time than you," his mom told him. Salvador didn't wait a second to spring into action.

He was only 15 years old, an enterprising ninth grader at a private school in San Juan, when Hurricane Maria hit. He excelled in his classes. But Hurricane Maria was not a class exercise. All around him, people were really dying. It has been estimated that more than 4,000 people were killed during Hurricane Maria, but the actual number is likely much higher. We might never know exactly how many lives the hurricane took: what we do know is that in the days and weeks following the storm, people were hungry, unwashed, and plunged into darkness.

Salvador didn't have the power to turn "five loaves of bread and two fish" into enough nourishment to feed the multitudes, but he was determined to do what he could. Knowing that the storm had knocked out power across the island, he realized two things. Without electricity people would feel unsafe going into the streets after dark; and they would have trouble washing their clothes, which could lead to a number of preventable illnesses, not to mention a pervasive feeling of uncleanness that would negatively affect their mental health over time.

Salvador knew that Puerto Rico's strong sun—the same sun that gives elderly residents heat stroke, and forces Puerto Ricans to carry umbrellas during the day—could provide the energy to power new equipment. Solar power could make it possible for people to cleanse themselves, protect their families, and feel safe during the night. It could also help usher in new modes of sustainable living that would last well after the power had come back on.

Salvador calculated that a donation of around \$100 could provide a solar light, a mobile phone charger, and a hand-crank washing machine to a family in need. With the help of his mom and Neha Misrah, the cofounder of Solar Sister, a nonprofit that distributes solar panels to women entrepreneurs in Africa, he started a GoFundMe campaign and called it Light and Hope for Puerto Rico. “Neha was my guiding light and mentor from the beginning,” Savador says.

His GoFundMe campaign was an immediate success. He reached out to his parents' friends and colleagues in the mainland U.S., and anyone else he could think of, and invited them to pitch in. In only four days they had raised \$36,000. Within the first three weeks, the campaign had raised \$65,000. Salvador shared his story online so people from around the world could help too. In the end, more than 1,200 people pledged more than \$160,000 — enough to provide 3,500 households with solar light, mobile phone chargers, and nonelectric portable washing machines.

But he didn't stop there: he began researching, and then reaching out to organizations that could help. He came across The Laundry Alternative, a company that sells sustainable, hand-operated washing machines. Soon other companies offered to pitch in: Gentlewasher, EasyGo, Mpowerd, Schneider Electric, and Omnivoltaic Energy Solutions. The crowdfunding campaign grew into a movement, defined by a simple, universal equation: C + Feel = Hope (See + Feel = Hope).

In the wake of the storm, good news in Puerto Rico was hard to come by. Perhaps that's why the media took notice of Salvador's campaign. He quickly found himself the subject of profiles in *CNN Money*, *Teen Vogue* and the online site Remezcla, and he became inundated with requests for interviews. He was even named a *TIME Magazine* Teen of the Year, alongside *Stranger Things* actor Millie Bobby Brown and snowboarder Chloe Kim.

Thrust suddenly into the spotlight, Salvador remained humble. He remembered what his mom had told him, and kept his focus on helping others. And he didn't just talk the talk: he walked the walk. While some kids were spending their weekends playing video games, Salvador was out in the streets teaching people how to use the lanterns and set up the washing machines. His goal was simple: to hand out solar lanterns, phone chargers, and washing machines until the need was completely met; or until every single light came back on.

Salvador traversed the entire island, going door to door to deliver the supplies. He started by delivering supplies in the town of Loiza, which had been devastated by the eye of the storm. But soon community leaders from other towns learned about the project, and asked if he could help them out, too.

He ended up visiting 17 towns, as well as a pediatric hospital in San Juan. When he saw the desperation of people's situations, it inspired him to keep going. “I hadn't really seen, really experienced, what people were actually living,” he says. “But when you're there, you're literally among piles of debris, piles of clothes, of belongings, that are just broken or wet or destroyed, or just gone. Ruins of houses. You see doors lying on the ground...that's when you realize: ‘Wow!’”

It took almost 11 months for power to be restored to Puerto Rico, making it the largest and longest blackout in U.S. history. Months after the storm had receded, rural communities across Puerto Rico were still plagued by rolling blackouts. For the people who lived through this period of darkness, it was an excruciating exercise in holding out hope. For scientists, sociologists and decision-makers, it was also a lesson in how to deal with the pernicious, often invisible, effects of climate change.

Puerto Rico's energy grid was outdated, made more for the 20th century than the 21st. When the utility poles came crashing down in the storm, backup generators across the country weren't prepared to handle the enormous energy needs of hospitals, schools, and modern apartment complexes. And the darkness— quite literally—sent many people into a state of depression, leading to a record number of suicides.

Climate change will undoubtedly bring about more storms like this. Warmer seas will increase the wind speeds of tropical storms, and storm surges, where tidal waves crash onto coastal areas, are expected to grow in size as sea levels

rise. It's places like Puerto Rico that will be hit the hardest: tiny islands that are already more likely to suffer from poverty and underdevelopment. But it's also in places like Puerto Rico that communities are gaining the tools to allow themselves to strike back. Time and again, Puerto Ricans have proved that they are resilient and resourceful people.

If there is more darkness in the future, it can only be counterbalanced with more light—and like Salvador's campaign to bring light back to Puerto Rico, the tiny island is giving itself hope.

By 2050, Puerto Rico aspires to run on 100 percent renewable energy. All across the island, solar panels are appearing on rooftops, in gardens, on the tops of schools and hospitals. And they are decorating the landscape, reflecting the blue of the ocean. Puerto Rico wasn't ready for Hurricane Maria, but in the years to come it will be more prepared. Solar panels are more resilient than the old-fashioned energy systems, and switching to solar will make it easier for places like Puerto Rico to regain power in the wake of future storms. Out of tragedy comes change.

Salvador is still in high school, but he is already taking his message on the road. At the Davos World Economic Forum he spoke about his campaign to bring light and hope to Puerto Rico to the world's top political and business leaders. On a panel with other teen changemakers and environmental activist Greta Thunberg, they held the rich and powerful accountable. Offstage, Salvador also got to speak with inspiring activists like Jane Goodall. She told him that in order to create change, young people and older generations would have to work together. "We can't do things alone, we have to be able to communicate with each other," she said to him.

Salvador spoke proudly of his Puerto Rican roots, and the broken promises that have led us to where we are today, with a climate that is being destroyed and a political system that badly needs fixing. "We're tired of too many people coming to Davos, and then going back and not doing anything," he said. "We're tired of empty promises, we're tired of too much talk." He added, "Our people need action. They need our support. Today."

*Every individual matters.*

*Every individual has a role to play.*

*Every individual makes a difference.*

Jane Goodall

**Call to Action:** Adopt renewable energy in your home. Learn about solar power. And follow Salvador on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sgomezcolon>

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