

JC woman seeks help to reunite family after hurricane

- News Tribune eReader
- 12 Nov 2017
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John and Stacey Sevilla pose together in an undated photo. The couple have been geographically separated by economic setbacks and Hurricane Maria, and Stacey is raising money to bring her husband, his belongings and their two dogs back to Missouri in the storm's aftermath.

A local woman is trying to reunite with her husband after the destruction of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and she's asking for help through a GoFundMe fundraising campaign.

"He's doing OK, but for him to even agree for me to do a GoFundMe, that tells me he's not doing as well as he's letting on. He's not the kind of guy to ask for help," Stacey Sevilla said of her husband, John Sevilla, who's stranded on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques.

Stacey and John have been married six years. A Minnesota native, she said they met through a friend, moved to where he was living in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and got married.

John worked in construction, but the recession put him out of work in 2009. She said a friend told them how great Vieques was, and they moved to Puerto Rico.

"It was fun in the beginning, but trying to make a living down there is pretty hard," because she said Vieques' economy is mostly tourist-driven. She said John did find a good job at a sporting goods store that does tours and rents equipment for diving, fishing and biking. She worked as a housekeeper.

"It's a very small island — 3 miles wide, 21 miles long," and she said much of the island still isn't fit for human habitation after the U.S. Navy used it as a bombing range in the 1950s. However, tourists came for Puerto Mosquito, a bioluminescent bay on the southern part of the island.

Bioluminescence refers to the ability of some organisms to produce light naturally — think fireflies and deep-sea creatures. At Puerto Mosquito, tiny oceanic organisms called dinoflagellates produce bursts of bright, blue light that illuminate the bay's water at night, according to the island's tourist promotion website.

However, like so many homes and lives, Hurricane Maria may have destroyed Puerto Mosquito and Puerto Rico's two other bioluminescent bays if the storm significantly changed the hydrology of the areas, USA Today reported in September.

Beyond the possible damage to the island's biosphere and the long-term effect that would have on Vieques' eco-tourist economy, Maria ravaged the island's infrastructure.

"There's no power. They just now started getting some internet and better cell service. That took almost a month," Stacey said Thursday.

Maria made landfall Sept. 20 in Puerto Rico, with maximum sustained winds of 155 mph.

"I haven't actually spoken to him since before the storm," Stacey said of communication with John; everything's had to be via texting since Maria.

She's actually been off Vieques and in Jefferson City for about three years to be close to her mom and take care of health concerns. She works at Hawthorn Bank.

It was always the plan for John to join her, but she said economic setbacks kept preventing that from happening. Then Maria came, along with Hurricane Irma before it.

On her GoFundMe page, she wrote "the strain for both of us trying to support two households for such an extended period of time has drained our savings. Now, since the devastation caused by the hurricanes, I have spent what money I could sending care packages of necessary food and supplies for John and our two dogs."

She said Friday that her husband's hours at work have been cut to only 10 per week, and their landlord on the island refuses to lower John's rent. While she said John's going to ask FEMA if there's any recourse, she would like to collect \$4,000 to get John, his belongings, and their two dogs, Chica and Lacy, to Missouri, and in the meantime continue to take care of John's survival needs in the aftermath of the hurricane.

John's informed her their home sustained some damage in the storm, though she said it doesn't seem to be as bad as other people's that are in an unlivable condition. She added many people are trying to get off the island.

She said Vieques is only accessible by ferry or plane, and it took a while after the storm to get the ferry running again. Stacey said it could cost close to \$1,000 just to fly John to Puerto Rico's main island, including possibly \$300 for each dog if they have to board as cargo. Mailing the last of his belongings like clothes and personal items, including a bicycle he's put a lot of work into, could cost another \$1,000. Stacey said she and John want to be able to have the bike in Missouri to ride together when he gets here.

She said his cheapest option would be to take a ferry to the main island, then a taxi to the airport to get him a flight to the U.S. mainland. "I still don't know what he's planning," she said.

She said in the meantime, he's survived on food and water he stocked up before Maria hit, and he's started to receive care packages, but food for him and their dogs has been hard to come by — especially meat, fruit and vegetables for him.

The GoFundMe page notes John is also dealing with unspecified health issues, and one of the dogs needs medical attention as well, "so it is even more necessary for us to get them back to the states as soon as possible to care for these concerns."

"It's hard me to even express it, because I've never had to ask for anything like this," Stacey said of asking for help. "I hope that people would take notice and be willing to reach out to somebody who's been affected by that."

The GoFundMe is accessible at gofundme.com/hnqmg4-helpbring-my-husband-home. The page also notes, “Any extra funds will be donated to those in need on the island.”