

Hi everyone! My name is René, I am a rising senior majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering. This is actually not the first time I've stood on stage for this event. Last year I came up and talked to froshlings not unlike yourselves about my struggles fitting into MIT. As a Puerto Rican boy with a tepid interest in science and engineering, I found MIT to be a place I had a lot of difficulty calling home. This led to me going on leave for a year to teach Computer Science back home in Puerto Rico, and I eventually came back with a newfound passion for urban science and social justice issues.

I say this not to imply that me being here is just another Friday, but rather to illustrate that at this point last year I was very confident that I knew exactly the direction my life would take, not unlike some of you that are taking 8.012 because you just *know* you're gonna major in physics. I was so confident that I was more than willing to share my success story with roughly a thousand strangers at this event. Unfortunately for me, life sometimes has a way of taking everything you think and putting it on its head in a perfect storm. In my case, this was a very literal storm.

On September 20th of last year, Hurricane María entered Puerto Rico. That day, the entire communications infrastructure of the island collapsed. The most surreal experience ever was watching the Snap Map, seeing one by one each of the stories disappearing until 24 hours later there was nothing. I stayed glued to the one radio station that was operating at the time for days for any updates on my southern hometown of Ponce. The first was a phone call that the mayor made to the radio station on the day after. She said that Ponce was devastated and that there were 1300 people seeking shelter. The call dropped after she said that. When my rightfully concerned friends asked me how my family was doing, my responses varied. On better days, I would say that I didn't know, but that they were intelligent people that were unlikely to put themselves in danger. On worse days, I would say "for all I know, they are dead."

Fortunately, they were not dead, but they were having miserable time with no power, water or gas. And here I was, in my air-conditioned room, walking five minutes to the closest dining hall, where I had not even thought about whether I had water to drink or power for my phone. I felt guilty being here, knowing that while my only worries were getting homework done, there was a real chance that my family did not have enough food to last the day. Most of all, I felt the perfect worldview I had crafted for myself, the same one I had gleefully talked about at orientation less than a month earlier, slipping through my fingers. What am I doing here? What could possibly be more important than being there for my family and my country?

Out of pure coincidence, I had just attended Terrascope lunch where some folks from the PKG Public Service Center were talking about their fellowship opportunities. Mind you, at this point in my life I had a very narrow view of what public service was. For me, public service was volunteering with your frat to paint a fence on a Saturday morning; something that looks good on a brochure but is relatively insignificant. However, the folks at the PKG talked about people that actually piloted social enterprises and made a difference in people's lives in a global setting. With a little bit of humility, I reached out to a past contact in the PKG and said "I have no idea how any of this works, but I want to help."

So the PKG took me in and I spent all of IAP traveling through the south of Puerto Rico, connecting with people and hearing their stories. I will admit, it was a bit crazy. You would drive around not knowing if you would be hit by a car because the traffic light wasn't working, or if you would be hit by the traffic light because it was hanging by a thread. My dad was caught in a shootout, a part of a recent crime wave that resulted from the government's inability to pay police officers. But amid all this I

saw an incredible sense of ingenuity and cooperation between people. For example, farms would often share resources related to irrigation solutions with past competitors in order to stay afloat. Local pharmacies established an incredibly effective supply network even when all communications were down by way of physical notes. And seeing all this amazing innovation assured me that I needed to be a part of this.

I definitely learned about the technical aspects of disaster response from the experience. But I think that most of the growth from this experience came in three internal ways. First, I established a really important and cool support network within the PKG. After coming back to MIT, the folks at the office were extremely supportive in my desire to expand my newly found interest in social entrepreneurship as it pertained to energy in Puerto Rico. They completely took me in when I wanted to pilot my own enterprise, and when we had to shift course they promptly connected me to a PKG alum that founded a renewable energy social enterprise, where I ended up interning at this past summer. Second, no matter how much you might think that you have your life figured out, it only takes one event for your life plan to be turned on its head. Don't stress out about it; embrace it.

Finally, and this is my main message, while you're here you will face some situation back home that you seemingly have no agency on. And I'm not just talking about natural disasters. Some of you might have a family member suffering from Alzheimer's, or a white supremacist rally, or lead poisoning in your drinking water. And you might feel the same guilt that I once did; you might feel like you abandoned ship to come live at this ivory tower where only first world problems abound. It might feel like what you're doing right now is insignificant to the problems in the real world.

I'm here to tell you that that's not the case. You are here at MIT so that, when you are back home or wherever you might end up, you actually do have the agency to enact meaningful change on the biggest problems in the world. It took me a long time to take advantage of the resources at MIT and actually feel empowered to do this. I invite you to start thinking about changing the world now.