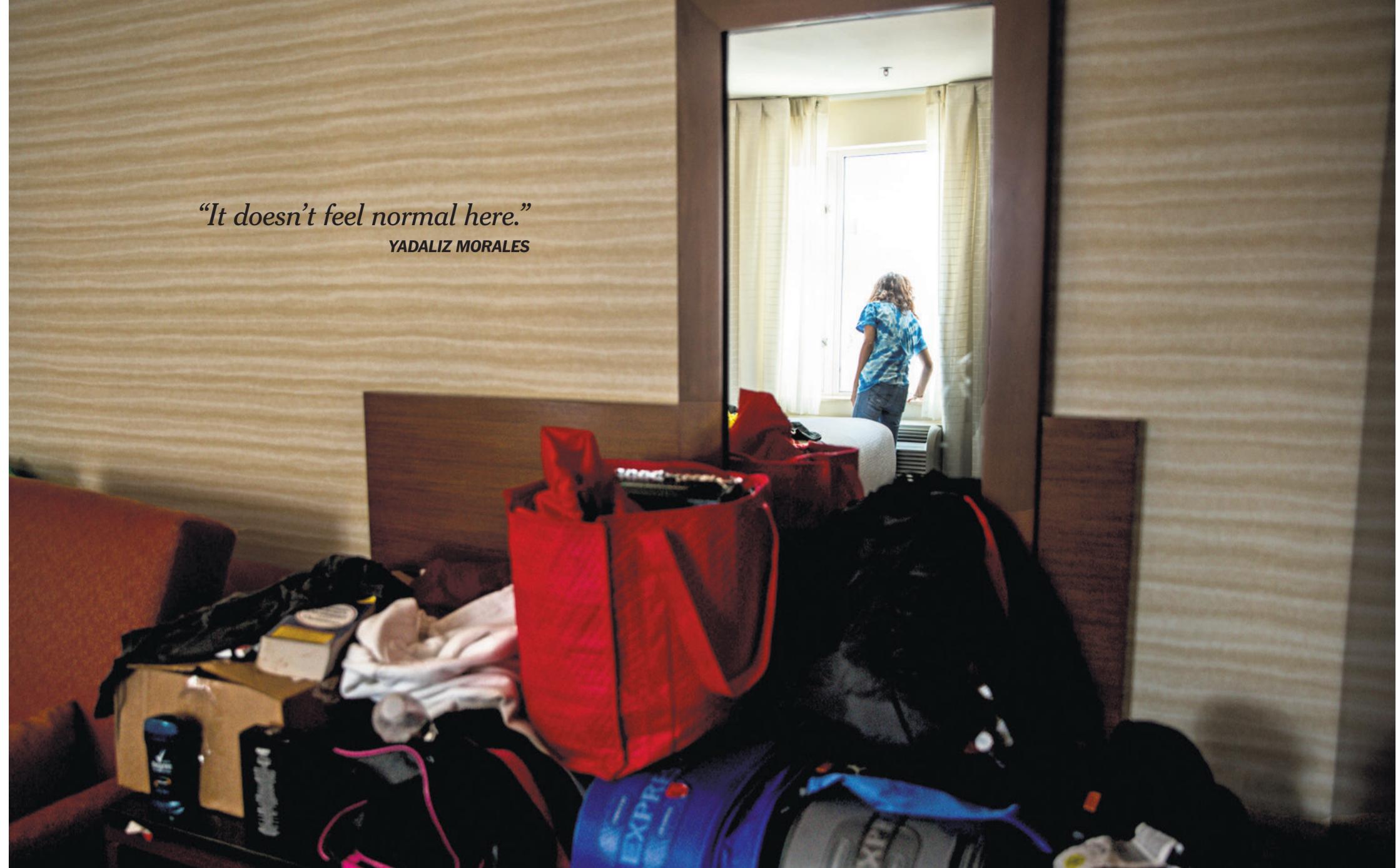


"It doesn't feel normal here."

YADALIZ MORALES



Yadaliz Morales, 17, looks out of the hotel room in New York City where her family has been staying since fleeing hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico. They can't go home, but New York isn't home, either.

After Hurricane, a Family Seeks New Roots

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY AILEEN PERILLA

Liz Cruz knew the moment she and her family boarded a plane on Dec. 7, bound for New York City from hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico, that there was no turning back.

"I felt like getting off the plane and saying 'No, I'm staying here,'" said Ms. Cruz, 34. "But, sometimes you have to make tough decisions." She, her husband and three children each packed one suitcase filled with the clothes and belongings that were left after Hurricane Maria devastated their hometown of Isabela.

That tough decision has left them feeling unmoored in temporary housing at a Fairfield Inn & Suites on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. But the federal program that is providing shelter for them is set to end June 30.

"It hurts," Ms. Cruz said of the looming deadline. "It hurts. Essentially, I'm out on the street." Despite this, the family is eager to settle into its new city.

"We don't have a permanent home and if we were to return to Puerto Rico, I still wouldn't have a home," Ms. Cruz said. "Maybe if we had a permanent home, where we can cook, clean and sleep in, then maybe I could start feeling at home here."

Ms. Cruz's husband, Elvin González, 28, managed to get a cleaning job. But Ms. Cruz has struggled to find a job with the flexibility needed to juggle work and her children. New York Disaster Interfaith Services, a nonprofit that works in

partnership with other organizations to provide disaster recovery services in New York City, helped the family navigate the Transitional Shelter Assistance program from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and also provided Ms. Cruz with temporary work helping other Puerto Rican families in need of assistance.

Without steady employment, however, Ms. Cruz and her family cannot afford New York City rent, which is often beyond the means of even two-income families. Also, many brokers and apartment complexes require good credit, a stable income and savings.

Peter Gudaitis, the executive director for the interfaith nonprofit, said about 5,000 Puerto Ricans had come to New York after the storm. About 20 percent had returned to the island, he said. Many of those who remain experience "sticker shock" as they try to make new lives in New York.

Ms. Cruz said she and her husband tried to stick it out in their home in Isabela after Maria struck in September, going months without electricity or stable water sources. They worried about their safety with no windows to prevent looters from breaking into their home. They finally made the difficult decision to leave.

Ms. Cruz's children, Yadaliz, 17, Kryss 15, and Yasmin, 14, have found the transition difficult. Living in a hotel was a

welcomed change, but months after, the initial comfort has waned.

Yadaliz left friends and a boyfriend back in Puerto Rico.

"It doesn't feel normal here," she said. "There's no nature." For Yadaliz, days in Puerto Rico were spent outdoors with friends. Trying to make friends here is hard, too. "Here you say hi to someone and then you never see them again." She hoped to be enrolled in college, but she had trouble navigating the system and a mix-up with the entrance exams has kept her out of school. Yadaliz did recently get some good news: She was accepted for an internship with Harvey Epstein, an Assembly member for the 74th District.

The youngest member of the family, Yasmin, is enrolled at University Neighborhood Middle School and has found some refuge in sports. Still, frustration lingers as she struggles academically because of a learning disability.

Kryss is the only one in his family who says he does not mind his new life in New York. He feels like he was meant to be here. Still, the uncertainty of not having a home is a constant worry, he said. "Where are we going to go?"

Isabela was the exit point for Maria, a Category 4 hurricane that left at least 64 dead, though some estimates are much higher, including one released on Tuesday, which put the number of deaths at roughly 4,600, many of them from delayed medical care. Much of the island

was also left without power. Maria significantly damaged the Guajataca River dam, leading to the evacuation of 70,000 homes in the neighboring towns that included Isabela and Ms. Cruz's parents' hometown of San Sebastián.

The family lived in public housing in Isabela, which they forfeited when they had to leave. The time it would take for the reapplication process would leave them in a situation similar to the one they are currently facing in New York. Ms. Cruz also believes the economy in New York could offer better prospects for her family.

Ms. Cruz's parents also came to New York, but they have since returned to Puerto Rico. Her parents' health problems, including a recent diagnosis of cancer for her mother, worry Ms. Cruz.

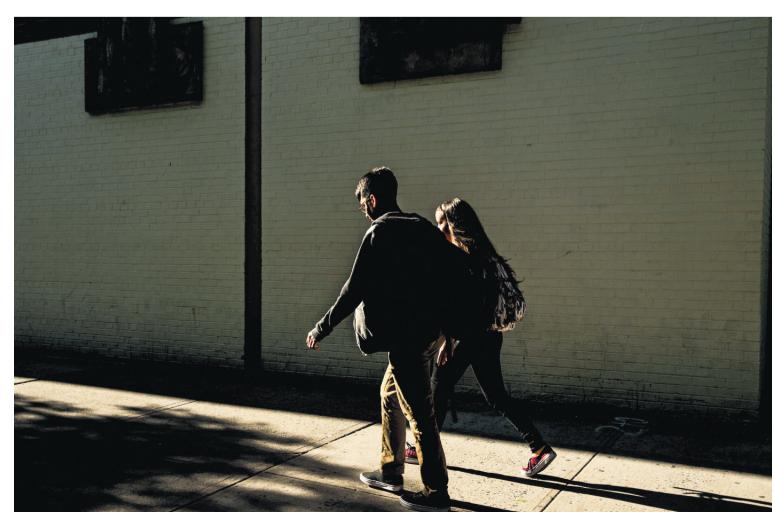
"We can't go back," Ms. Cruz said. Financially, it is untenable, she said. And Maria's devastation of their town, Isabela, makes a return impractical.

So the family is determined to stay.

"I can't keep having my kids go back and forth," Ms. Cruz said. "They deserve to go to school and finish peacefully."

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Clockwise from top left: Liz Cruz, 34, displaced by a hurricane herself, works temporarily at a disaster recovery service. Yasmin Morales, 14, center, and her siblings go over the school day with their mother. Kryss and Yasmin Morales have a short walk to their school in Chinatown. Yadaliz Morales and her mother look at new shoes for Yadaliz's new internship. Yasmin gets ready for school.