

Puerto Rico's Joyful Saints

By LaRene Porter Gaunt

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Visitors find pleasure in the warmth and beauty of this island, but Latter-day Saints who live here know that real joy is found in the gospel.

"Puerto Rico—Isle of Enchantment." So say the words written on the license plates of this United States territory, words hinting at wondrous scenes. And, indeed, though only one hundred miles by thirty-five miles in size, Puerto Rico is filled with enchanting beauty. From the rain forests of 3,500-foot-high El Yunque in the Luquillo Mountains of the north to the slightly drier climate of the south, every view includes the mountains or the seashore or both. Tourists arrive daily by plane and cruise ship to enjoy the year-round sixty- to ninety-degree temperatures. The city of San Juan, heart of this island and home to half of the 4.1 million people who live here, boasts a fort and revitalized city section more than four hundred years old. Along the miles of sandy beaches, lofty palms catch the trade winds and the rustling sound merges with the fragrance of flowering plants. Swimming, sailing, or sunning fills the days, and the laughter and music of the nightlife continually beckon. Yet Latter-day Saints who live here have learned the truth of **Doctrine and Covenants 101:36 [D&C 101:36]**: "In this world your joy is not full, but in [Christ] your joy is full."

"I used to spend a lot of time with my friends, especially on Friday nights," says Orlando Irizarry, a cabinetmaker in Cabo Rojo who was baptized in 1979, "but I felt something was missing from my life. I wondered what my wife, Irma, and I could give our three daughters that would be of lasting value. I began to pray about these feelings, and so when the missionaries came to our home, I felt as if I had been waiting for them and their message. Now the gospel brings joy into our lives, and my daughters have that which matters most."

Fourteen thousand others in Puerto Rico have found joy in the gospel of **Jesus Christ**, and with eight districts and fifty-three branches, the Church here is well established.

Beginnings in Puerto Rico

In 1493 Christopher Columbus discovered the West Indies, a string of islands that curls from the Gulf of Mexico to the northern tip of South America, and claimed it for the Spanish monarchy. He named the island, now known as Puerto Rico, San Juan Bautista (St. John the Baptist), and Spanish settlement began in 1508. Juan Ponce de León, who is best known for discovering Florida in his search for the legendary Fountain of Youth, served as the first governor. Gold and sugarcane attracted other settlers, and the island eventually became known as Puerto Rico, which means "rich port." Its colorful history over the next centuries under Spanish rule included everything from pirates to plantations. As a result of the many people who migrated to this island—Spanish, English, African, Irish, Dutch, French, American, and others—Puerto Ricans enjoy a rich racial heritage. When the Spanish-American War ended in 1898, Puerto Rico became a United States territory.

Today, nearly one hundred years later, the blending of Spanish and United States culture is evident everywhere. Both the Puerto Rican

and the United States flags fly over public buildings. Currency is the same as in the United States. Spanish is the primary language, but English is taught daily to schoolchildren. The result is a bilingual society where communication is in Spanish or English or a combination of the two that locals call "Spanglish." Speed limits on the multilane highway that circles the island are posted in miles per hour, but distances are posted in kilometers. United States department-store chains are common, as are small roadside vendors who sell everything from fresh fruits and vegetables to T-shirts bearing United States icons. It is as easy to get a hamburger for lunch as it is to get a plate of rice and beans. And shuttling back and forth between the United States and Puerto Rico is common among Puerto Ricans, but no matter what takes them to the United States, most Puerto Ricans eventually return to the soothing ocean breezes of their homeland.

With the establishment of United States military bases in Puerto Rico during World War II and the arrival of Latter-day Saint military families came the beginnings of the Church. The first branch, established in 1956 to serve the military families, was English-speaking. One set of missionaries served the entire island.

María Christina Sosa Burk was among the first native Puerto Ricans to be baptized. The wife of a Latter-day Saint military man from Arizona, María was baptized in 1956. The Burks' sons were baptized when they turned eight. William, the oldest, became one of the first Puerto Ricans to serve a mission when he went to Uruguay in 1969.

During the 1980s, the balance of membership shifted from English-speaking to Spanish-speaking as native Puerto Ricans began to join the Church in great numbers. Stakes were formed between 1980 and 1985 in the cities of San Juan, Carolina, Ponce, and Mayagüez. Membership grew so fast that in December 1993 Elder L. Tom Perry of

the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles visited Puerto Rico and divided these four large stakes into eight districts of more manageable size. Now members have more opportunities to develop their priesthood and leadership skills. They also develop a **family** feeling within their branches, resulting in a higher activity rate and stronger auxiliary programs.

"Our salvation doesn't depend on whether we are a stake or a district but on our individual work," says William A. Burk, president of the San Juan Puerto Rico District.

Renewed commitment is evident everywhere. In Humacao, branch president Angel Rodríguez-Negrón, a financial consultant, says, "We want to make the Humacao Branch as close to heaven as possible. This desire to succeed is in the hearts and minds of the people. We need to follow the handbook. It's all there."

Members of this small but enthusiastic branch planned an open house featuring nine booths, each showing a different facet of the gospel. Only one visitor came, but members were not discouraged.

"We grew so much by reviewing the basic doctrine, and we had so much fun that it really drew us together," says Maritza Reyes, a university English professor. "We kept our good attitude, and we used our booths later at our branch picnic where many people saw them."

Such is the spirit of members today who are focusing on strengthening the gospel in their districts. As a result, the eight districts of Arecibo, Caguas, Carolina, Guayama, Mayagüez, Ponce, San Juan, and Toa Baja are thriving.

"Love in Our Hearts"

"You can take our picture," said a member of the Guaynabo Branch,

"but you won't be able to photograph the love in our hearts." It is true that much of the reason for success here lies in this basic good nature of the people of Puerto Rico, who find joy in socializing, spirituality, and serving one another. The gospel of Jesus Christ is compatible with these traits and enhances them.

"Want to see a happy man? Then look at me!" says Alberto Zayas of the Caparra Branch. "Sure I have problems, but the gospel helps me deal with them."

Angel L. García of the Pontezuela Branch, who works at a computer college, says, "I am happy because I have Christ in my life and I know my prayers are answered."

Lucy Casablanca, the mother of two and a member of the Carolina Branch since 1977, says, "We have always had a warm family feeling, but the gospel brought light into our relationship and made it eternal." Her husband, Justo Casablanca, agrees. "Look for the joyful moments in your life," he says. "We should look for joy in our Church callings, be happy, and have fun as we live the gospel."

Well respected as a spiritual leader, Brother Casablanca is the first to take his own advice and "look for the joyful moments in life." At Christmastime, he leads the high priests in his branch in a Puerto Rican tradition called *parranda*. The Casablanca's gather several families together, along with a few guitars or other musical instruments, and sing Christmas carols outside another member's home. They are soon invited in and spend an hour or so eating, singing, laughing, and dancing. Then the visited family joins the group, and everyone goes to another home. This progressive party goes on all night long and can end up with fifty to one hundred people in the group. "We often visit less-active members so we can all join in the fun," says Brother Casablanca.

This love for socializing is widespread among Church members here. For example, the youth in the Ponce First Branch have joined together to learn the traditional folk dances of Puerto Rico, and their performances are complete with scenery and costumes that they create themselves. Relief Society meetings and activities, such as celebration of the Relief Society birthday on March 17, are well attended by members from throughout the district. Programs may include a fashion show, a dramatic presentation, musical numbers, or a handicrafts display—all done out of a love of being together. In recent years, many members of the one English-speaking branch in San Juan have begun attending Spanish-speaking branches to join in the joyful spirit and to lend their experience.

Puerto Rican Saints take advantage of every opportunity to be together. Noel Muñoz, elders quorum president in the Arecibo Branch, encourages his family to be as actively involved in church as possible. “You don’t know when the Lord will speak to you or when he will need you,” he says.

“I Yearned to Learn the Scriptures”

The people of this island have a deeply spiritual side to their nature. Many, such as Doel Irizarry of the Guayanilla Branch, who runs a small grocery store, have been converted to the gospel because of a dream or a spiritual prompting. “In 1979 the missionaries asked our family to pray about the **Book of Mormon**,” he says. “That night, I knelt in prayer with my wife, Cruz, and our children, Maritza and Eric, and prayed to know if the Book of Mormon was true. I had a dream that was repeated three times. When I went to church the next week, to my surprise I met the man whom I had seen in my dream. The details of my dream came to pass. I knew this was the answer to my prayer.”

Most members, like the Torres family of the Arecibo Branch, have

scripture study programs in their home. Roberto and Migdalia Torres were baptized in 1984. "The gospel makes a difference in the way we think, behave, talk, and treat others," says Roberto Torres, a chemical engineer and father of four children ages six to twelve. "We feel strongly that parents should teach religion to their children. We pray and read the scriptures each morning. This gives the children the background to make good decisions during the day. We also teach them to fear evil."

Migdalia credits the gospel for increasing her skills as a mother. "Relief Society has given me knowledge on how to educate our children," she says. "Family home evening is very important in our home. Our children share in the responsibility and help give the lesson."

Another source of spiritual enhancement of these already spiritual people is the seminary program that has been set up in every branch on the island. Most of the teachers are branch members who voluntarily teach the youth in an early morning class. In addition to teaching, they pick up their five or six students and drive them to the church for class and afterward to school. "I yearned to learn the scriptures," says Sister Muñoz of Arecibo, "and I have as a result of teaching seminary." With more than fifty seminary teachers in Puerto Rico, the seminary program has a strong influence on families as well as on the youth.

Ernesto Rivera, president of the Toa Baja district, feels strongly about the importance of spiritual development. "We must be willing to give up material possessions for spiritual blessings," he says. "Like the rich young ruler in **Luke 18:18–25**, we will also someday need to chose between the things of the world and the things of our Heavenly Father. But we can do it and attain our goal. The growth of the gospel in Puerto Rico depends on our spirituality."

This combination of socializing and spirituality means that meetings and classes are a blend of laughter and tears as members speak, teach, and bear testimony of the gospel. Missionary and member-**missionary work** also benefit from this active spirituality. The Muñoz family of the Arecibo Branch have been outstanding member missionaries since their own baptisms in 1986.

"After we were baptized, everyone tried harder in our family," says twenty-year-old Gissette Muñoz. "We were united. The teasing stopped. We were kinder to each other, and we talked to each other more often. Since the gospel helped us so much, we all wanted to share the gospel with others."

Two families in their neighborhood have been baptized, and so have several members of Sister Muñoz's family, three of Brother Muñoz's friends, and two of Gissette's friends.

Like many Latter-day Saints, this family has discovered the joy of missionary work. "Members are beginning to reach out more to their families and friends with the gospel," says Ronald E. Dyer, recently released president of the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission. "There has been an increase in members working with the full-time missionaries. That's the key to a strong missionary program."

Many young men and women have tapped into this missionary spirit and served full-time missions. "I had a strong desire to serve a mission," says Maritza Irizarry of the Guayanilla Branch, who served in Mexico City. Our family has been blessed greatly because of my mission. My grandparents learned of the gospel as I prepared to go on a mission, and they were baptized the week before I left. While I was gone my grandmother became ill, but she prayed to live until I returned. I had to come home two months early because of my own ill health, but I arrived in time to visit with my dear grandmother before

she died. I believe that visit was possible because of her faith.”

Television public service announcements sponsored by the Church greatly aid the missionary effort in Puerto Rico. In 1978 Tomás and María Olmo of San Germán and their family had committed to be baptized, but María was unsure. “One morning I awoke with a severe headache,” she says. “It persisted all day and into the night. Finally, I couldn’t stand the pain any longer, so I knelt down to pray in my bedroom. The television was on in the background. I prayed for relief from my headache and to know if I should be baptized. When I finished praying, I opened my eyes, and at that very moment a public service announcement sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came on television. I felt warm from head to toe, and my headache left immediately. I had no doubt after that.” Many other Puerto Rican Latter-day Saints have had spiritual experiences when watching a Church public service announcement.

In addition to missionary work, helping less-active Latter-day Saints to reestablish their testimonies and return to full activity is an ongoing challenge. In the Ponce First Branch, leaders took an aggressive approach to activation. They drew upon all interested members to help them in a kind of “activation battalion.” “Everyone gathered at the chapel on a designated evening,” says Miguel Alvarado Sr., a government prosecutor of juveniles and president of the Ponce First Branch. “Leaders passed out cards with the names and addresses of less-active members to pairs of branch members. Everyone had only a few people to visit. At the end of two hours, members met back at the chapel to report on their visits. This proved to be an efficient means of locating less-active members and reestablishing contact. Follow-up on this initial activity has helped revitalize our branch.”

In the Yauco Branch, activation has a high profile. “As visiting teachers,

we pray for the less active we visit to come back to Christ," says Sister Lizzi Pérez. Both counselors in the branch presidency were less active less than a year ago, before their call to serve in the presidency. "We helped them by giving them love and by being with them," says branch president Rodrigo Pérez. "Our branch is getting to be a big family as a result of all our fellowshipping. Nine of our members are planning to go to the Orlando Florida Temple—two of whom were less active seven months ago."

"It Is the Lord's"

The standard of living for the general population is slightly higher on Puerto Rico than on the other islands of the West Indies. Most people live in one-story, painted cement-block homes with flat roofs designed to withstand the violent hurricanes that rake across the Caribbean. Homes have ceiling fans, glassless louvered windows, and tiled floors to help keep them cool. The windows, doors, and porches of most homes and buildings are encased with decorative wrought-iron bars—partly for decoration and partly for protection since windows are almost always left open.

Latter-day Saints commonly reserve one of their living room walls for a picture grouping that includes pictures of Christ, a temple, and the children and grandchildren as well as a picture of the family on the temple grounds the day they were sealed. In the evening, families move onto their porches to talk and sip icy glasses of fruit juice such as guava, papaya, or mango. The sound of *Ko-Key, Ko-Key* echoes through the moist air. It is the call of the coquí, a species of small frog native only to Puerto Rico, singing to each other in the night.

Yes, Latter-day Saints here have much to be grateful for and often sing "Because I Have Been Given Much" (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 219) in their meetings. However, since employment opportunities fluctuate, many

people still struggle financially.

“Tithing is the strongest test,” says Victor González of the Ponce First Branch, “but we have everything we need and more when my wife, Lucy, and I pay our tithing.” The Landróns, Héctor and Daisy, who are also in the Ponce First Branch and friends of the Gonzálezes, have found that obedience to the principle of tithing has blessed their lives, too. Twelve years ago Brother Landrón fell from a ladder and broke his leg in two places. Because he has diabetes, his leg has failed to heal properly. “I still have trouble with my leg,” he says, “and that has meant that our financial situation has remained a challenge. But we pay our tithing and always have what we need, much like in the parable of the loaves and fishes.”

In spite of such challenges, generosity and a willingness to care for one another are evident in Puerto Rican branches. Héctor and Amarilis Alvarez of the Caparra Branch are not rich, but they share what they have with others. Careful budgeting of their money has allowed them to buy a home in the hills of Bayamón overlooking San Juan. Party life is tempting to Puerto Rican youth, so leaders like Brother Alvarez—who works as a coordinator for the Church Educational System (CES)—provide alternatives. His patio has a barbecue, a sink, tables, chairs, a ping pong table, and lots of room for dancing. Nothing is fancy, but the youth always have a good time at the Alvarez home.

“Mi casa es su casa” (My house is your house), he says. “What I am doing is what other people did for me when I was growing up. I know that the people I help will help others.”

The Alvarezes' generosity is well known. A small downstairs apartment is ready for those in need of temporary lodging, and transportation and a listening ear are available.

"Helping others is no problem," says Brother Alvarez. "I feel it is not my time or my home—they are the Lord's."

On 30 June 1995 Jesús Nieves became the island's first Puerto Rican mission president. "The future is bright," says President Nieves, who was baptized in 1977 with his wife and four children in Carolina, a part of the greater San Juan area. "I love the people of Puerto Rico, and they love the gospel. I believe we will succeed because of the love and support we have for each other."

Joy, for Puerto Rican Latter-day Saints, is more than pleasures associated with sunshine and ocean breezes. The gospel has enhanced the finest traits of these people, and the result is a joyful "family" of Saints.

The Stone and the Temple

Sylvia Sierra found herself in the middle of a divorce in October 1981. "I began to ask myself many questions: 'Why am I here?' 'What else is there?' I wanted something more, so I began to read the **Bible**. I found great hope when I read, 'The God of heaven [shall] set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed. ... A stone ... cut out without hands ... filled the whole earth'(Dan. 2:44, 34–35).

"I cried when I read this scripture. I thought if I could only find that 'stone,' I would find the answers to my questions. But after nearly two years, I stopped looking for it, though I never gave up hope."

Shortly after that, Sylvia attended church with a Latter-day Saint friend. "When I entered the chapel, I realized immediately that I had never felt anything as great as what I was then feeling. In Relief Society, we saw a video called *Together Forever*. I heard a voice within me say, 'This is what you are looking for.'"

The missionaries began to teach Sylvia the gospel, and she was baptized eight days later. The following year she received her endowment at the Washington Temple.

"For the first time I realized all the blessings the Lord had for me," she says. "The temple is everything. I continually yearn for those blessings and to return to the temple."

Temple attendance has become the focus of Sister Sierra's life, now a member of the Guaynabo Branch. She works three jobs as a cleaning lady and sells food at a roadside stand to earn money to go to the temple. "I work hard, but it is not a burden," she says. "It is relaxing to know I am working to go to the temple. There is no prize like the blessings of the temple, so it is not a sacrifice."

When Sister Sierra returned from her first trip to the temple, she read Doctrine and Covenants 65:2 [D&C 65:2] during her regular scripture study: "The keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth."

"I got a knot in my throat and cried as I realized that the gospel is the stone that I had read about in the Bible," she says. "I had found the stone when I was baptized without even realizing it. I am so grateful to my Redeemer. I know that he lives, and one day I will see him face to face."

Puerto Rican Youth: Pulling Together

With strength, commitment, and emotion, nearly a hundred young women and men in the Toa Baja Puerto Rico District sang as they pulled their handcarts up and over the steep hills of Monagas Park in the morning sunshine of 11 March 1995. Reenacting the trek of the

Latter-day Saint handcart pioneers at a super-Saturday activity, the youth sang first in Spanish—“*Como os he amado, amad a otros*”—and then in English—“As I have loved you, love one another” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 308). Some joined hands, and others could not resist skipping as they sang.

Stopping along the way in small groups at predetermined spots, the youth read of the experiences of Latter-day Saint pioneers. Several were weeping by the time they finished. The group moved on, singing, “*¡Grande eres tú!*” (How great thou art! [*Hymns*, 1985, no. 86]).

“We want our seminary students to realize that our sacrifices, no matter how great, are but a little bit compared to the pioneers,” says Alberto Zayas, associate CES director for the Caribbean. “Seminary helps our youth develop testimonies, so every branch on this island has a class, and two universities each have a Latter-day Saint Student Association [LDSSA].”

Providing plenty of activities for Puerto Rican youth is essential in this tropical paradise. “This is a party island, and there is a lot of temptation here for our youth,” says Bruni Moreno, Young Women president in the Toa Baja district. “We try to keep our youth busy with dances and parties because they like to be together. But we know that is not enough. We also provide opportunities, such as our recent trip to the Orlando Florida Temple, for them to feel the Spirit. That is the most important gift we can give them. It’s one thing the world can’t give them.”

One Latter-day Saint young man in Mayagüez says, “When I was fifteen, I started smoking because my friends pressured me. After two weeks, I knew this was not what I wanted to do.” Kneeling by his bed in the middle of the day, this young man poured out his heart to Heavenly Father and asked for help to quit smoking and to be able to

deal with peer pressure. He stopped smoking immediately, but the tormenting of some of his friends continued. "I guess I'll always have pressure from my friends at school," he says, "but now I know the Lord will help me to deal with it."

In the Naranjito Branch, seventeen-year-old Jonathan Negrón says, "I know it is hard because of all the pressures on us, but the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet helps me to live the gospel. And when I feel like I am going to fall, I pray for strength."

Bryan Ríos of the Humacao Branch joined the Church as a young man. "I don't know where I would be without the gospel," he says. "This is not only a religion; it is a way of life. I feel like I have been called to march in a 'royal army,' and I would defend the gospel and the Book of Mormon with my life."

Thanks to caring local youth leaders and a strong seminary and institute program, Puerto Rican youth are a "royal army" pulling together, helping each other to come unto Christ.

[photos] Photography by David and LaRene Gaunt

[photos] Puerto Rican Latter-day Saints, such as Albi, Bruni, and José Moreno of the Bayamón Branch (left), this young lady in Toa Baja (above), Juan Olmo of San Germán (below), and Orlando and Irma Irizarry of Cabo Rojo (bottom), deeply appreciate the blessings of the restored gospel.

[photo] Goats graze in the countryside near San Germán.

[photos] Marivid Alvarado (far left) and other young men and young women in Ponce (bottom) love to perform local folk dances.

[photo] In San Juan, Marleen Cabrera and Tania Suarez are representative of many young women who enjoy Relief Society.

[photo] Young Adults from Ponce to Toa Baja enjoy youth activities, such as this seminary handcart trek.

[photo] Sylvia Sierra

[photos] Children, such as this Primary boy and these girls dressed in their Sunday best, eagerly learn of the gospel at church.

*[photos] Children also benefit from the commitment of Puerto Rican families to hold **family** home evenings. In Arecibo, Lyvia Martinez (middle right) shows a picture to her family; and Alexandra, Roberto Carlos, and Andrea Torres (bottom right) listen intently to their father.*

[photos] The light of the gospel shines in the faces of Héctor and Amarilis Álvarez of the Caparra Branch (left). Top insets, left to right: Detail of the fire station on the plaza in Ponce, Tomás Olmo of San Germán, Leonor Hernandez of Mayagüez, the Díaz family of Fajardo—Rafael and Luz (foreground) and their children Lorena and Bianca. Bottom inset: Angel L. García of the Pontezuela Branch.

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