



TISHMAN CENTER · JULY 1, 2025

# In the Spirit of Guasábara: A Reflection from Borikén (Puerto Rico) through Spirit, Struggle & Solidarity



***Photo from left to right: Host Committee from Murciélagos Beach Defenders and Campamento Pelícano Aguadilla, Alegna Malavé Marrero, Mariposa "Myriam," Jaris Delgado, and Iona.***

Author: 2024-2026 EJ Fellow  
 Alegna Malavé Marrero, Founder and Director, Murciélagos Beach Defenders, Borikén, and Technical Coach Jaris Delgado, Beach Defender, Clinical Psychologist, Environmentalist, and Educator, Campamento Pelícano Aguadilla, Borikén

This past April, we had the honor of welcoming the EJ Disrupt Design Fellowship (EJDD) to our land, Borikén (Puerto Rico). As EJDD host committee chairs and tech coach, this experience was a collective invocation of memory, place, ancestry, and shared struggle across waters and generations.

From the start of the EJDD Borikén retreat, it was clear we were not gathering as strangers. What emerged was a deeply felt union of minds, hearts, and spirits. We saw

it in the bright eyes filled with curiosity, the willingness to listen, and the way laughter and language flowed across the spaces we shared. It was a meeting of intentions—brave, creative, and aligned.



*Photo from left to right:  
Nanakawey, 2024-2026 EJ  
Fellow Lynnette GreyBull, Not Our Native Daughters,  
Amanax Ri, and family.*

As hosts, we carried many hopes into the week. We wanted EJ Fellows to leave the retreat not only with strategies, but also with something deeper- a heartbeat, perhaps, aligned with the rhythm of the ocean. We wanted EJ Fellows to feel the intensity of love and defense we hold for our people, our land, and the sacred cultural practices that guide us.

At Cueva María de la Cruz and Cueva del Indio, ceremonies led by Amanax Ri, Nanakawey, Margie Noguera “Kukuya”, Linda Velarde, and accompanied by music from Alexandra Rivera, surrounded us in

spiritual truth. For many of us, colonization stripped away our ancestral practices. Being able to return to them, through prayer, music, dance, and presence, was a powerful reconnection. It opened our hearts, calmed our nervous systems, and reminded us that organizing, culture, and healing are not separate. They are the same.



*Photo from left to right:  
Ceremony Leaders Opili-  
Melissa Rosario; Margie  
Noguera "Kukuya"; Alexandra  
Rivera; Linda Velarde; Uruki-  
fire keeper; with Angela  
Mahecha, Tishman Center.*

**What image or  
feeling rises first  
when you think  
back on the week?**

**Alegna:** Minds connecting, bright eyes full of curiosity, people asking questions, feelings of enthusiasm and strength. It was a powerful meeting of creative intentions.

Bright colors, greens, yellow, and  
Monica Dennis' orange flower  
leggings against the green  
backdrop.

**Jaris:** *Agua, Familia, unión, universalidad, círculo, heartwarming, impresión, milagritos, agradecimiento.* The faces of each EJ Fellow and the richness of their cultures. This retreat was different. It did not ask us to choose between strategy and spirit. It demanded both.



*Photo from left to right: 2024-2026 EJ Fellows Jorden Giger, Black Lives Matter South Bend; and Host Committee Chair Alegna Malavé Marrero, Murciélagos Beach Defenders*

**What acts of  
solidarity moved  
you the most?**

**Alegna:** Taylor Griggs helped set up the banners. I knew she was getting beaten by the sun, and she was so invested in making everything

happen. Afterwards, Jorden Giger walked beside me holding the banner, and it was heartwarming. Pā'ele Kiakona and my husband, Francisco Javier Nolla Vilá, shook hands after installing the signage. It was powerful.



*Photo from left to right: Host Committee Member Francisco Javier Nolla Vilá, Sojourn Puerto Rico; and 2024-2026 EJ Fellow Pā'ele Kiakona, Lāhainā Strong*

**Jaris:** Everyone. The genuine, generous connections. Their love, openness, intelligence, and leadership. Seeing what we can achieve together fills me with emotion and hope. Thousands of seeds of liberation are scattered across the Americas.

As a tech coach and psychologist, I (Jaris) felt moved by the way people came together across language, gender, ability, and identity. We saw our differences, but more importantly, we saw our shared longings. For sovereignty. For restoration. For connection.

I come from Rincón, a small rural coastal town on the west coast of Borikén. My background as a behavioral scientist, combined with over a decade of work as a community psychologist with marginalized populations, has taught me a great deal about justice and healing. I've worked with students, incarcerated individuals, survivors of domestic violence, LGBTQ+ communities, and women like myself, survivors of complex trauma. These lived experiences, paired with my community leadership, allow me to offer a unique synthesis of perspectives: neurodivergent, Caribbean, Antillean, Boricua, and colonized "American." We are many things at once, and in the collective weaving of our textures, flavors, and colors, the divine reveals itself.



*Photo from top to bottom, left to right: EJ Fellows Ajulo Othow, [EnerWealth Solutions](#); Vivian Huang, [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#); Vivian Breckenridge, [Just Homes](#); AJ Hudson, [UPROSE](#); Nadezna Ortega, [Tagnawa](#); Lynnette Grey Bull, [Not Our Native Daughters](#); Alegna Malavé Marrero, [Murciélagos Beach Defenders](#); Khara Jabola-Carolus, [Roots Reborn](#); Juan Rosario, [AMANESER 2025](#); Kaniela Ing, [Green New Deal Network](#); Jorden Giger, [Black Lives Matter South Bend](#); With EJ Fellowship Staff and Facilitators René Benavides and Viveka Chen of [co-LAB Collective](#); Marouh Hussein, [Crystal Clarity](#), Angelica Salazar, and Dr. Ana Baptista; and [Murciélagos Beach Defenders](#) Host Committee, Technical Coach, Ceremony Leaders, and Language Justice Practitioners/ Interpreters Kelvin Inel Iñaki Cuhano*

***Mariposa Myriam, Linda  
Velarde, Jaris Delgado, Iona,  
and Kathy at the Cueva del  
Indio Act of Solidarity,  
Arecibo, Borikén***

## **What did it feel like to bring this retreat home to Borikén?**

**Alegna:** In Borikén, we are a kinship of ancestral legacy, and we feel very proud to have a unique cosmovision that unites all Boricuas across generations globally. To share with our diasporic family, our respect and fierce defense of our ancestral ceremonial sites are crucial for representing a living culture that had to make resilience and cultural resistance its best survival tools.

Welcoming Crystal Clarity—brilliant graphic notetaker and artist for EJDD—alongside her mother back to their ancestral homeland was one of the most humbling and deeply honoring experiences. To witness their homecoming was to feel the power of love, memory, and belonging. We all seek to belong somewhere, and Borikén is home to many. We have the honor to steward the homecoming of our Boricua family.

To share the space with EJ Fellows from the Philippines, Hawai'i, and Indigenous territories was a profound reassurance of our shared colonial histories. We recognized patterns of military occupation, agricultural displacement, and imposed food systems. And in sharing those truths, we opened the door to unified strategies and collective amplification.



*Photo from left to right: Host Committee Chair and Tech Coach Jaris Delgado, Campamento Pelícano Aguadilla; and 2024-2026 EJ Fellow Jorden Giger, Black Lives Matter South Bend*

**What wisdom was shared that should not be forgotten?**

**Alegna:** "Scale it up." The power of showing up authentically, clearly manifesting objectives, and *continuously identifying how we're to*

serve our collective needs. Our musical traditions carried us too. The drums, maracas, and voices that rang through El Bastión on our final night reminded us that cultural resistance is not a metaphor. It is real. It moves bodies, opens portals, and fortifies movements.

**Jaris:** The importance of using art to reach more people. Inclusion, empathy, diversity, and respect for each person's boundaries. Looking beyond our immediate context to learn from others' struggles globally. Our shared movements give us strength, validation, and direction.



*Photo from left to right: Host Committee Chair and Tech Coach Jaris Delgado, Campamento Pelícano Aguadilla; 2024-2026 EJ Fellow Jorden Giger, Black Lives Matter South Bend; Host Committee Chair and 2024-2026 EJ Fellow Alegna Malavé Marrero, Murciélagos Beach Defenders; and Angela Mahecha, Tishman Center.*

# What would you say to those reading this who weren't there?

**Jaris:** This was a gathering of many minds and hearts from environmental justice leaders across Borikén and Turtle Island (United States). We exchanged knowledge, faced challenges, and looked for solutions together. It reminded us that we are not alone in our struggles and helped us feel stronger through collective nourishment- emotionally, spiritually, and politically. I'm especially grateful to Mariposa Myriam, a Legacy Beach Defender, from [Murciélagos Beach Defenders](#), for the trust and opportunity, and to Myrna of [Sanate Boricua](#), who recommended me for this opportunity. It was a unique and unforgettable experience.



**Photo from left to right: Y No  
Había Luz Members with  
2021-2023 EJ Fellow and**

**Process Coach, Julio César  
Morales**

## And what of the design work?

We bodystormed. We co-created. We prototyped new ways of solving problems rooted in place and relationship. We asked the hard questions: *How do we scale community solutions without replicating harm? How do we stay in imagination, rather than just reacting? How do we stay together?*

The answers weren't always clear. But what became clear was that joy, rest, and ceremony are not luxuries. They are strategies. They are what allow us to survive systems built to break us.

We thank every person who came, listened, offered, and showed up fully. We thank our fellow islanders who shared sacred space with grace and power, especially those from Murciélagos Beach Defenders, Campamento Pelícano Aguadilla, Organización Boricuá de Agricultura Ecológica de Puerto Rico, AMANESER 2025, and Y No Había Luz. And we honor every contribution, visible and invisible,

that helped this gathering become what it was: *a celebration of resistance, a restoration of memory, and a blueprint for what's possible.*

To those who weren't there: we felt you. This movement is wide and growing. May the stories we tell be worthy of the power we carry.

This is how we design in the spirit of *Guasábara*.

—Alegna & Jaris



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