

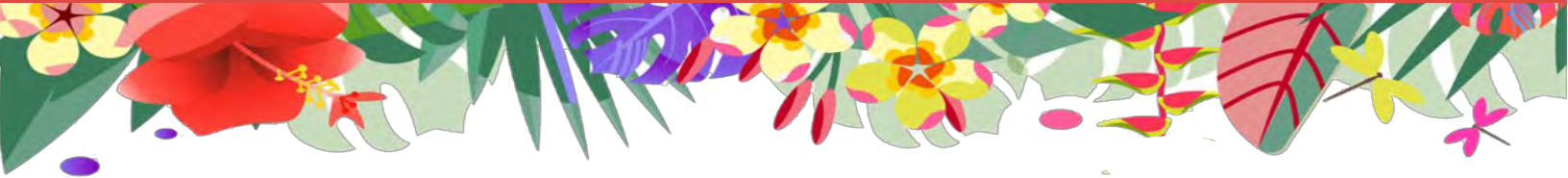
Connections

Caribbean-American Heritage 2021



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Office of Policy, Management and Budget- Administrative Services
and the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Civil Rights



August 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I'm pleased to present to you our delightful Caribbean-American Heritage edition of **Connections** Magazine. The bright colors, swaying rhythms and delicious flavors of the Caribbean exemplify the joyous ways Caribbean Americans have brightened all of our lives. I hope you enjoy this visit to paradise as much as I did!

In this issue:

- Gracing the cover is **Janice Piñero** and her husband, **Bernardo Perez** with daughters **Elena Sofia Perez** (12) and **Natalia Maria Perez** (3);
- **Secretary Deb Haaland** shares a special message (next page);
- **Barbara Hayden** explores how Puerto Rico has demonstrated great resilience in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria (page 7);
- **Meryland Cuevas-Canela** receives this month's Vanguard Award (page 15);
- **Barbara Green** launches her new column, Reflections (page 16);
- We meet just a few members of **DOI's Caribbean Family** (pages 19-34); and
- **Cynthia Baca** shares her thoughts on the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (page 36).



I look forward to continuing the conversation each month with **Connections** and our **Third Thursdays** roundtable discussions (see page 37 for details) as we envision together a more inclusive, equitable and respectful future for us all.

As always, please be well and stay safe.

Jacqueline M. Jones



Connections magazine is produced each month by a collaborative, multiagency team of volunteer employees from throughout DOI. Under the direction of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administrative Services **Jacqueline M. Jones** and Director of the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Civil Rights **Erica White-Dunston, Esq.**, who serves as the Principal

Diversity Officer for the Department, the **Connections** team strives to foster an environment where all employees are respected, valued, accepted, appreciated and feel included.

To find out more or to submit your ideas and suggestions for future issues, please contact editor Steve Carlisle at stephen_carlisle@ibc.doi.gov. Your input is very welcome!

Message from Secretary Deb Haaland

Dear Colleagues,

Summer is full of celebration at the Department of the Interior! This month, we recognize the contributions and rich culture of our Caribbean-American brothers and sisters. The Caribbean is unique and full of a beautiful mix of cultures. When we honor Caribbean heritage, we recognize that Caribbean Americans have intersectional identities with African, Hispanic, Indigenous and European roots throughout the region.

Some of my heroes – like our country’s first Black Congresswoman [Shirley Chisholm](#) and our first Latina Supreme Court Justice [Sonia Sotomayor](#) – share Caribbean heritage. There are so many Caribbean Americans who have left their mark on our country’s history and continue to break barriers for future generations, such as [Wilma Lewis](#), currently a federal judge in the U.S. Virgin Islands and the first female U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia. In 1983, Judge Lewis served as DOI’s Associate Solicitor for General Law and later as Inspector General. In 2009, President Obama nominated Judge Lewis to serve as Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management.

Our team members with Caribbean-American heritage have an important voice in our mission. The work we do in the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and all the Caribbean islands uplifts communities, tells America’s stories,



spurs economic and job development and helps protect coastlines from the impacts of climate change.

Thank you all for your commitment to recognizing the diverse and rich stories of America to create a brighter future for everyone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deb Haaland". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a light-colored background.



“Hard work, dedication, distinguished service and integrity—the qualities that I admired in my role models as a youngster are the same qualities that I have attempted to bring to my professional endeavors . . . We live in very challenging times as public servants, times when the public, whom we serve, is demanding more accountability, economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the operations of its government . . . Inspectors General are agents of positive change striving for continuous improvement in their agencies’ management and program operations and in their own offices. If confirmed, I would welcome the opportunity to lead the quest for positive change as Inspector General of the U.S. Department of the Interior.”

- Wilma Lewis, [Senate Confirmation Hearing](#) for DOI Inspector General, February 1995



Did you know?

- As of 2016, about 13 million Americans - approximately 4% of the total population - have Caribbean ancestry.
- Approximately 63% of Caribbean immigrants in the U.S. live in the greater New York and Miami metropolitan areas.
- On average, 25 million tourists visit each year.
- The Caribbean region includes about 700 islands, islets, reefs, and cays in and surrounding the Caribbean Sea. Across the Caribbean region, there is diverse topography including coral reefs, mountains, tropical forests, low-lying plantations, valleys, waterfalls and volcanoes.

POPULATIONS

1. Cuba	11,252,999
2. Haiti	10,981,229
3. Dominican Republic	10,766,998
4. Puerto Rico (US)	3,508,000
5. Jamaica	2,729,000
6. Trinidad and Tobago	1,357,000
7. Guyana	747,000
8. Suriname	556,368
9. Guadeloupe (France)	405,000
10. Martinique (France)	383,000
11. Bahamas	379,000
12. Belize	347,369

National Parks of the Caribbean



America's Caribbean



From the [National Park Service](#)

The National Park Service manages six parks in the Caribbean, one park in Puerto Rico and five in the U.S. Virgin Islands. These parks offer rich cultural experiences and pristine waters in the tropics. At San Juan National Historic Park you will find a World Heritage Site that dates back to 1539, Castillo San Felipe del Morro. The U.S. Virgin Islands offers breathtaking hills, valley, beaches and an impressive barrier reef that is preserved to protect "one of the finest marine gardens in the Caribbean Sea."

[San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico](#)

San Juan National Historic Site preserves stories of great ambition and aspirations. Countries fought for control of this tiny yet strategic island for centuries. Generations of soldiers have lived and worked within the forts. Visitors today are as inspired by these stories as they are by the beauty of the architecture and the ingenuity of design and engineering of this World Heritage Site.

[Virgin Islands National Park, U.S. Virgin Islands](#)

Virgin Islands National Park's hills, valleys and beaches are breathtaking. Within its 7,000 plus acres on the island of St. John is the complex history of civilizations - both free and enslaved - dating back more than a thousand years, all who utilized the land and the sea for survival.

[Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument](#)

Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument includes federal submerged lands within the 3-mile belt off the island of St. John.

These waters support a diverse and complex system of coral reefs and other ecosystems such as shoreline mangrove forests and seagrass beds.

[Buck Island Reef National Monument](#)

Buck Island Reef National Monument was established by Presidential proclamation in 1961, and expanded in 2001, in order to preserve "one of the finest marine gardens in the Caribbean Sea." The park is now one of only a few fully marine protected areas in the National Park System. The 176-acre island and surrounding coral reef ecosystem support a large variety of native flora and fauna, including several endangered and threatened species such as hawksbill turtles and brown pelicans. The elkhorn coral barrier reef that surrounds two-thirds of the island has extraordinary coral formations, deep grottoes, abundant reef fishes, sea fans and gorgonians. Although mainly known for its coral reef and nesting sites for turtles and birds, Buck Island has a rich cultural history as well.

[Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve](#)

Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve uniquely documents the human and natural Caribbean world from the earliest indigenous settlements in the central Caribbean to their clash with seven different colonial European powers to the present day.

[Christiansted National Historic Site](#)

No place in the Caribbean still demonstrates the architectural, economic and political influence of Europe like Christiansted National Historic Site. Come wander through 18th century buildings in one the Caribbean's few urban parks- it is a unique experience that you will never forget.

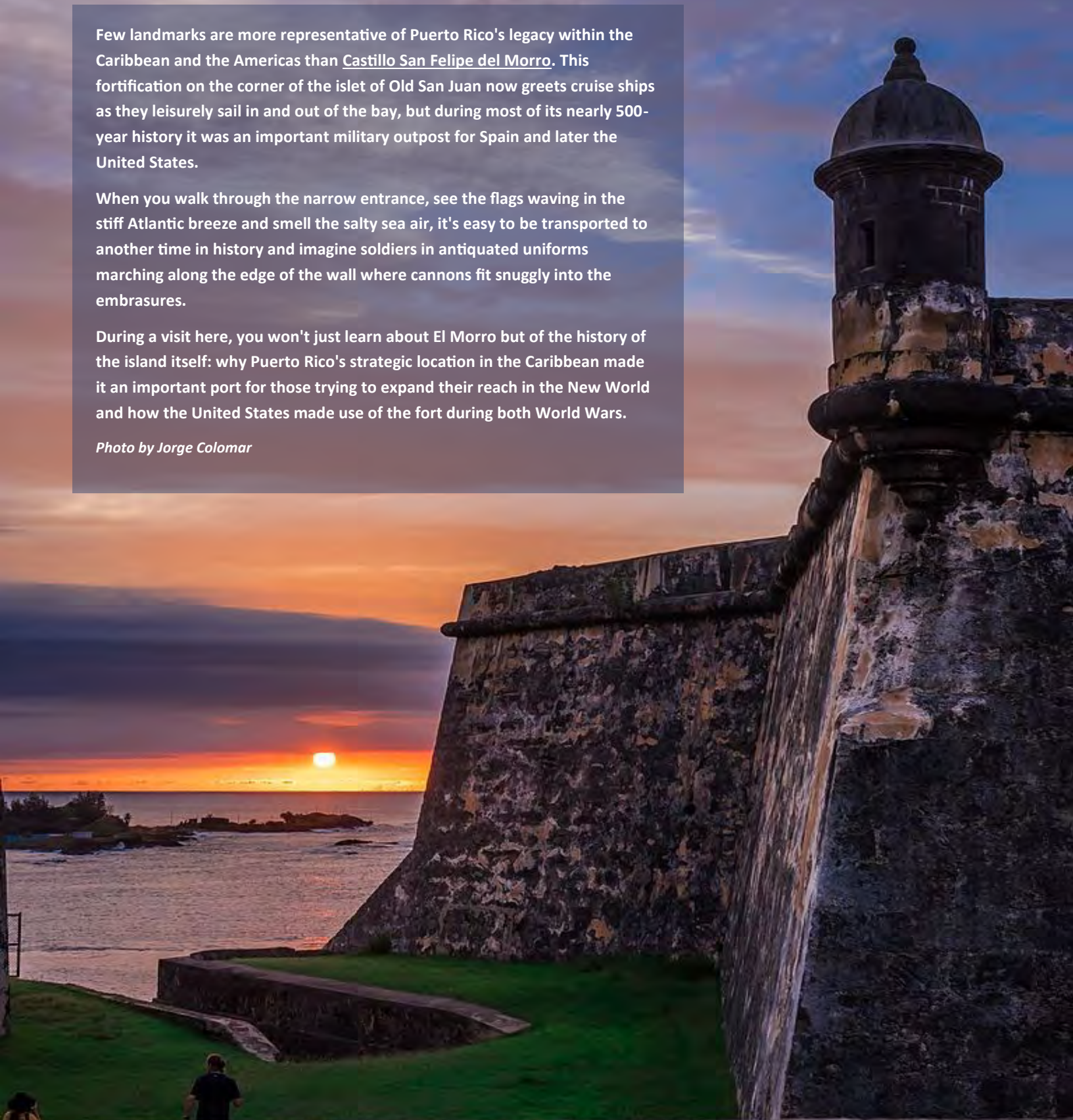
Castillo San Felipe del Morro, Old San Juan, Puerto Rico

Few landmarks are more representative of Puerto Rico's legacy within the Caribbean and the Americas than Castillo San Felipe del Morro. This fortification on the corner of the islet of Old San Juan now greets cruise ships as they leisurely sail in and out of the bay, but during most of its nearly 500-year history it was an important military outpost for Spain and later the United States.

When you walk through the narrow entrance, see the flags waving in the stiff Atlantic breeze and smell the salty sea air, it's easy to be transported to another time in history and imagine soldiers in antiquated uniforms marching along the edge of the wall where cannons fit snugly into the embrasures.

During a visit here, you won't just learn about El Morro but of the history of the island itself: why Puerto Rico's strategic location in the Caribbean made it an important port for those trying to expand their reach in the New World and how the United States made use of the fort during both World Wars.

Photo by Jorge Colomar



Puerto Rico Builds Resilience to Natural Disasters

By Barbara Hayden, RN, Occupational Health Nurse, OFAS Safety, Health and Environmental Branch, Washington, DC

Puerto Rico experiences hurricanes annually; but when Category 4 Hurricanes Irma and Maria took turns clobbering the island in September of 2017, the devastation surpassed anything in Puerto Rican history. The back-to-back tempests killed an estimated 2,982 Puerto Ricans and caused a humanitarian crisis. Survivors had no electricity, no cell or land line phone service, and little tap water. Worse, 85% of the homes in Puerto Rico were damaged, roads were impassable, and 26 bridges collapsed. The failure of the electrical grid after the storms remains the worst in U.S. history. Power was not fully restored for 11 months.

First Person Accounts of the Aftermath

Two US Geological Survey (USGS) employees returned to their native Puerto Rico after the hurricane and shared their experiences and photos.

Meralis Plaza-Toledo returned in early October of 2017 and wrote this account:

"Trying to get a flight to the island, two weeks after Hurricane Maria in September of 2017, was very difficult but I needed to go as all my family was there, including my husband. They told me to be prepared, but nothing prepares you for this. When I arrived, it was night and most of the island was without electricity so I couldn't see much beyond what the lights of the car illuminated. The next day was the reality check; beyond the terrible destruction of uprooted trees, ripped wooden and tin roofs, and collapsed power lines, the thing that really impacted me was seeing the trees that survived the storm without leaves. The usual greenery of my island was almost gone. We don't have a fall season in the tropics so seeing a standing tree without leaves means that it is either sick or dead; these trees were neither. The impression of seeing a mountain range with tree trunks standing like toothpicks without leaves was something that I will never forget."



Above: Photos by Meralis Plaza-Toledo, U.S. Geological Survey, taken two weeks after Hurricane Maria, Yabucoa, SE Puerto Rico, landfall location.



Meralis Plaza-Toledo, Physical Scientist, Country Specialist, USGS

Yadira Soto-Viruet returned to her hometown in Puerto Rico nine months after the hurricane and shared this recollection:

"I took this picture [right] in my beloved hometown, Caonillas, Utuado, nine months after Hurricane Maria made its landfall in Puerto Rico. It brought tears to my eyes seeing the devastation of my hometown and I couldn't stop thinking about the emotional impact to all the families who lost family members and/or their houses. I also thought about the resilience of Puerto Ricans and the long road ahead to recover the island after Hurricane Maria."

How much can a country take?

After the hurricanes, recovery was impeded by the exodus of working-age adults to the U.S. mainland. Then, nature sent another one-two punch in 2019 and 2020. A magnitude 6.4 earthquake struck in December of 2019. Before Puerto Ricans could catch their breath, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in March of 2020, bringing more economic hardship to struggling families.

DOI was there before, during and after the storms

USGS, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Park Service (NPS) employees in Puerto Rico endured the hurricanes and the earthquake. As soon as aircraft could land, teams of DOI recovery support personnel arrived. Equally important to the humanitarian relief was protecting the cultural resources of Puerto Rico, where 347 historic archeological sites are on the National Historic Landmark list and two, [La Fortaleza and Sitio Historico de San Juan](#), are UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Most DOI employees know that NPS preserves cultural resources, but few know that DOI's [Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance](#) (OEPC) shares that mission. OEPC's environmental response and recovery team facilitates the entire federal government's support to state, tribal, territorial, and local community recovery of their natural and cultural resources. NPS and OEPC-led cultural resource protection teams are still engaged in Puerto Rico's recovery.

[Continued]



Left: Yadira Soto-Viruet, Physical Scientist-Country Specialist, Global Mineral Analysis, USGS National Minerals Information Center, Reston, VA



From top: A craftsman repairs an intricate fresco; a restored home in historic Old San Juan; construction workers mend a roof. All images by Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández courtesy of Escuela Taller.

One Solution to a Two-Part Problem

After the disasters, the worst heartbreak has been losing young people to the mainland. Brainstorming with their Puerto Rican and nongovernmental partners, DOI technical experts asked, “What could be done to keep young people in the country, and rebuild it at the same time?” They asked, “Why not train young adults in the traditional building arts that would preserve Puerto Rico’s buildings?”

These questions led to the establishment of [Escuela Taller de Conservación y Restauración del Patrimonio Histórico de Puerto Rico](#) in December of 2020. The school provides training in all the building trades, particularly the traditional building methods of Puerto Rico and the restoration of historic structures.

Graduates from this school will preserve the architectural heritage of their island and have satisfying, lifelong employment. Saving the places of memory and community identity are essential to Puerto Rico’s resilience.

More about Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Maria:

[*How Should We Rebuild After a Natural Disaster?*](#)
[INTBAU](#)

[*The Essence of Puerto Rican Historic Architecture*](#)
[by Jorge Ortiz Colom](#)

[*La arquitectura patrimonial puertorriqueña y sus estilos*](#)
[by Arleen Charneco](#)

[*Esbozo de arquitectura histórica en Puerto Rico*](#)
[by Jorge Ortiz Colom](#)

[*Puerto Rico Historic Building Drawing Society*](#)

[*Listings in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places*](#)

[*About INTBAU, The International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture and Urbanism*](#)

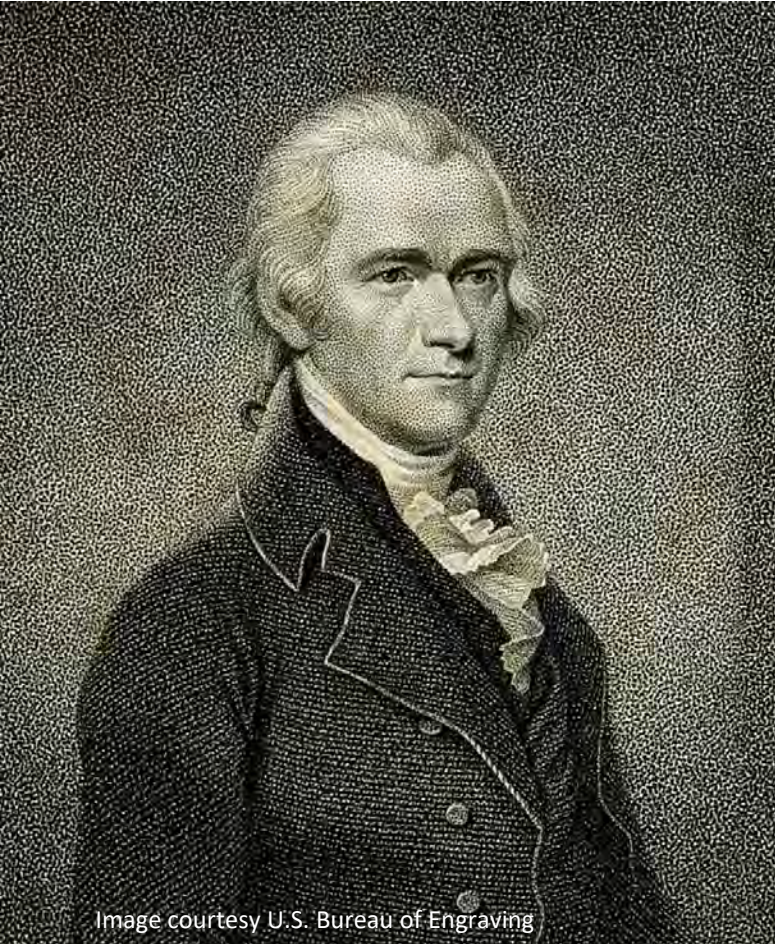


Image courtesy U.S. Bureau of Engraving

As Lin-Manuel Miranda writes in the musical, “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”

From Chernow’s biography:

From his illegitimate birth on Nevis to his bloody downfall in Weehawken, New Jersey [killed by Vice President Aaron Burr in a duel], Hamilton’s life was so tumultuous that only an audacious novelist could have dreamed it up. He embodied an enduring archetype: the obscure immigrant who comes to America, re-creates himself, and succeeds despite a lack of proper birth and breeding. The saga of his metamorphosis from an anguished clerk on St. Croix to the reigning presence in President George Washington’s cabinet offers both a gripping personal story and a panoramic view of the formative years of the republic.

Except for Washington, nobody stood closer to the center of American politics from 1776-1800 or cropped up at more turning points. More than anyone else, the omnipresent Hamilton galvanized, inspired and scandalized the newborn nation, serving as the flash point for pent-up conflicts of class, geography, race, religion and ideology. His contemporaries often seemed defined by how they reacted to the political gauntlets that he threw down repeatedly with such defiant panache.

According to [Hamilton: The Revolution](#) by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, both the biography and the musical “reintroduced people to the poor kid from the Caribbean who made the country rich and strong, an immigrant who came here to build a life for himself and ended up helping to build the nation. He is the prototype for millions of men and women who followed him and continue to arrive today.”

The lyrics from the musical resonate so strongly today as they encourage us all to follow in Hamilton’s footsteps and sing; “I am not throwing away my shot! I am not throwing away my shot! Hey yo, I’m just like my country, I’m young scrappy and hungry and I’m not throwing away my shot!”

Alexander Hamilton: Immigrants, We Get the Job Done!

By **Tonianne Baca-Green, JD, CADR**

Alexander Hamilton, one of the Founders of our great nation, was born in the Caribbean on the island of Nevis in the British West Indies and raised on St. Croix in what is now known as the U.S. Virgin Islands. He is now top of mind due to the Pulitzer prize and multiple Tony award-winning musical [Hamilton](#) and the award-winning [historical biography](#) by Ron Chernow of the same name. That recognition is much belated, and it could be argued that justice is finally being done to Hamilton in this recent recognition.

Did you know?

Nevis, Alexander Hamilton’s birthplace, is a small island in the Caribbean Sea that forms part of the inner arc of the Leeward Islands chain of the West Indies. Nevis and the neighboring island of Saint Kitts constitute one country: the Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis. Nevis is located near the northern end of the Lesser Antilles archipelago.





PUERTO RICO: SONIA SOTOMAYOR

Sonia Maria Sotomayor, born June 25, 1954, is an American lawyer and jurist who serves as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. She was appointed by President Barack Obama in May 2009 and confirmed in August of the same year. She is the first Hispanic and Latina Justice.

Sotomayor was born in The Bronx, New York City, to Puerto Rican-born parents. Her father died when she was nine, and she was subsequently raised by her mother. Sotomayor graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton University in 1976 and received her Juris Doctor from Yale Law School in 1979, where she was an editor at the Yale Law Journal. She worked as an assistant district attorney in New York for four and a half years before entering private practice in 1984. She played an active role on the boards of directors for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the State of New York Mortgage Agency and the New York City Campaign Finance Board.

Sotomayor was nominated to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York by President George H. W. Bush in 1991; confirmation followed in 1992. In 1997, she was nominated by President Bill Clinton to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, and she was eventually confirmed in 1998. On the Second Circuit, Sotomayor heard appeals in more than 3,000 cases and wrote approximately 380 opinions. Sotomayor has taught at the New York University School of Law and Columbia Law School.

In May 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Sotomayor to the Supreme Court following the retirement of Justice David Souter. Her nomination was confirmed by the Senate in August 2009 by a vote of 68–31. During her tenure on the Supreme Court, Sotomayor has been identified with concern for the rights of defendants, calls for reform of the criminal justice system, and making impassioned dissents on issues of race, gender and ethnic identity.

She maintains ties with Puerto Rico, visiting once or twice a year, speaking there occasionally, and visiting cousins and other relatives who still live in the Mayagüez area. She has long stressed her ethnic identity, saying in 1996, "Although I am an American, love my country and could achieve its opportunity of succeeding at anything I worked for, I also have a Latina soul and heart, with the magic that carries."

"I stand on the shoulders of countless people, yet there is one extraordinary person who is my life aspiration. That person is my mother, Celina Sotomayor."



Justice Sotomayor with students of the University of Washington School of Law, Seattle WA.

CARIBBEAN TRAVEL GUIDELINES

From USFWS

PLEASE NOTE: Due to COVID-19, we encourage everyone to consider the public health risks of traveling during the ongoing pandemic before finalizing travel plans. Thanks!

The Caribbean's biodiversity is unmatched. As a traveler, you can make choices to help end the illegal wildlife trafficking that threatens the variety of life in this stunning region.

When you travel in the Caribbean, you'll find wildlife and plant products for sale—as jewelry, clothes, pets, souvenirs and more. But just because you can buy something doesn't mean you can legally take it home. Exporting or importing products made from protected animals or plants may be illegal. Other wildlife products may require permits before you can bring them into the United States. By making informed choices, you can support wildlife conservation around the world—and avoid having your souvenir confiscated or paying a fine.

A region of remarkable beauty, the Caribbean is home to six of the world's seven sea turtle species and 14 percent of the world's coral reefs. Nearly one-third of the plants and animals in the Caribbean islands are found nowhere else in the world.

Consequently, many Caribbean countries protect their native wildlife under both national laws and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species ([CITES.org](https://www.cites.org)). Signed by more than 183 nations, this treaty supports sustainable trade in wildlife and plants while protecting endangered species.

Please support the conservation efforts of Caribbean nations: Learn the facts and ask questions before you buy any wildlife or plant product.

ASK BEFORE YOU BUY

Is your purchase legal and properly sourced? Ask the seller:

- *What is this product made of?*
- *Where did this product come from?*
- *Does this country allow the sale and export of this product?*
- *Do I need permits or other documents from this country or the United States to bring this item home?*

Questions about a purchase? Contact local natural resource agencies or the country's CITES Management Authority, or check [www.FWS.gov/international/permits](https://www.fws.gov/international/permits)

Sea turtles are reptiles remarkably suited to life in the sea.

Their hydrodynamic shape, large size and powerful front flippers allow them to dive to great depths and swim long distances. These front flippers are long, narrow, and wing like while their hind flippers are shorter. Although sea turtles can remain submerged for hours at a time while resting or sleeping, they typically surface several times each hour to breathe.

There are seven species of sea turtle: the green sea turtle, Hawksbill sea turtle, loggerhead sea turtle, Olive Ridley sea turtle, Kemp's ridley sea turtle, leatherback sea turtle and flatback sea turtle.

Sea turtles are among the oldest creatures on Earth and have remained essentially unchanged for 110 million years. In most sea turtles, the top shell—or carapace—is composed of many bones covered with horny scales, or scutes. Unlike their terrestrial relatives, they cannot retract their heads into their shells. The smallest of the sea turtles are the two species of ridleys, weighing in at 85 to 100 pounds (38 to 45 kilograms) as adults. Leatherbacks are the biggest and can grow to 2,000 pounds (900 kilograms). Most sea turtles grow slowly and have a lifespan of many decades.

Read more from the [Natural Wildlife Federation](https://www.nwf.org)

Photo courtesy NWF

Buy Informed: The FWS Infoguide to Shopping in the Caribbean

Before you buy souvenirs in the Caribbean, make sure that the country you're visiting allows the export of its native species or other wildlife. Remember: resource protection laws and treaties cover not only live animals and plants but also mounted specimens, foods, and parts and products made from or decorated with fur, hide, skins, feathers, scales, shell, antlers, horns, teeth, claws or bones.

Many protected wildlife products may not be legally imported into the United States and you should avoid purchasing such items. These guidelines apply to wildlife items that you carry with you or bring back in your checked luggage for your personal use, all of which must be declared to wildlife inspectors or customs officers. Stricter prohibitions may apply if you mail or ship your purchases home.

CORAL: Many Caribbean countries have laws that protect coral reefs. Many nations limit the collection, sale, and export of live coral and coral products. Consult local authorities before buying coral souvenirs, jewelry, or aquarium decorations—these items may require permits or be banned from export.

SHELLS: Check country laws before beachcombing or collecting shells. Certain countries limit the collection, sale and export of shells and shell products. Import restrictions may also apply.

SEA TURTLES: International trade in all sea turtle products is prohibited, and most Caribbean countries ban domestic sale, but poaching and commercial use remain serious threats. Avoid jewelry and sea turtle products made

from "tortoiseshell"; sea turtle meat, soup, eggs, facial creams, and shells; and leathers, boots, handbags, and other goods made from sea turtle skin. You may not import these items into the United States.

CONCH: Populations of queen conch in most areas of the Caribbean have declined due to intensive fishing for their meat and collection for their rare pearls and their shells, which are sold whole or made into carvings or jewelry. Many countries regulate collection and export of queen conch meat, shells and products. Always check country laws. International treaty restricts import to three shells in personal baggage.

BIRDS: In most cases, you cannot buy a wild bird (such as a parrot, macaw, cockatoo, or finch) in another country and bring it home with you. The United States prohibits the importation of the feathers and parts of most wild birds without a permit. This ban also includes mounted birds and bird nests.

CAVIAR: If you are on a cruise or visit a duty-free shop, you may have an opportunity to buy caviar. All sturgeon species are protected, and trade in sturgeon meat and caviar is regulated worldwide. Without a permit, you may import only up to 125 grams (about 4 ounces) of sturgeon caviar per person per trip, and some types are prohibited from import altogether.

REPTILES: Many leather manufacturers work with skins from sustainably harvested reptiles, such as the American alligator. But some snake, turtle, tortoise, crocodilian, and lizard species are protected; their import as pets or in leather products may be subject to trade restrictions. Check before buying reptiles or reptile products overseas or before taking these items with you when you travel outside the United States.

PLANTS: Plants, such as orchids, cacti, and cycads, may be subject to national and international conservation laws as well as strict pest regulations. Many countries inspect imported plants and require documents certifying that they are pest- and disease-free. Before you collect seeds or buy live plants to bring home, remember that species introduced into new places can become invasive, crowding out and endangering native plants. The importation of plants is additionally regulated by the Department of Agriculture.

INSECTS: You can find mounted butterflies, moths and other insects for sale in the Caribbean, and you may need permits to bring these items home. Check U.S. Department of Agriculture restrictions for more information.

OTHER SPECIES: Other wildlife and wildlife products can also be found for sale in the Caribbean. Among these are live monkeys, which are almost universally protected from trade, and products made from spotted cats, such as jaguars and ocelots, whose skins are prohibited in trade.

All photos courtesy of Sarah Metzger/USFWS



Grenada's Underwater Sculpture Park



The Molinere Underwater Sculpture Park is a collection of ecological underwater contemporary art located in the Caribbean sea off the west coast of Grenada, West Indies and was created by British sculptor [Jason deCaires Taylor](#). The artist's aim was to engage local people with the underwater environment that surrounds them using his works which are derived from life casts of the local community. He installed concrete figures onto the ocean floor, mostly consisting of a range of human forms, from solitary individuals to a ring of children holding hands, facing into the oceanic currents.

Photos and text courtesy Jason deCaires Taylor



VANGUARD AWARD

LEADING THE WAY

ADVOCATING FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION

MERYLAND CUEVAS-CANELA AUGUST 2021

The ***Vanguard Award*** is presented by the ***Connections*** Team each month to recognize and celebrate the achievements of DOI employees who lead the way championing equity and inclusion. For August, the ***Connections*** Team is delighted to honor Meryland Cuevas-Canela (she/her), NPS, Administrative Support Assistant for the Thomas Edison National Historical Park in Orange, NJ.

For more than 10 years, Meryland, who hails from Puerto Rico, has advocated for the LGBTQ+ community around the subject of domestic violence in same-sex relationships.

From 2010 to 2013 she was a member of the diversity committee as the LGBTQ+ advocate for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the San Juan, Puerto Rico, district office. In 2012 she was awarded the Diversity In Action Award from the region for her work in inclusion and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ members of the agency and was elected as President of FDA Globe, the LGBTQ+ organization for Food and Drug Administration employees.

For her outstanding efforts, the ***Connections*** Team presents Meryland with our ***Vanguard Award*** for August 2021.



**By Barbara Green, Equal Opportunity Manager,
NPS Region 11, Anchorage, AK**

Gamsahabnida (thank you) for allowing me an opportunity to introduce myself. I am Barbara Green, a veritable multi-cultural spicy stew consisting of South Korean heritage with a smidgen of Chinese and Japanese from my mother, and Scotch-Irish with a bit of Swedish and Russian blended in from my father. I am proud of my ancestry and it was truly a blessing to grow up being raised in two different cultures. It was also challenging since I unfortunately experienced blatant racism, which ultimately turned me into a stronger person, and gave me the ability to empathize with the plight of those who are disenfranchised and marginalized.

I consider myself a Seoul city girl. I was born in Seoul, graduated from Seoul American High School, and returned to the Republic of Korea as an adult when I worked for the Army Audit Agency. I am also an Army brat; my late grandfather and late father served in the Army and my husband retired from the Army. Can you say, “Hooah?” You bet, for those who are familiar with the Army.

I am the Equal Opportunity Manager for the National Park Service, Region 11 (Alaska), and my background helped me to understand the criticality of diversity and inclusion and why it matters. Most of my federal career was spent with the Department of Defense and I chose to work for Interior to branch out and expand my horizons.

From Mount Rainier to Denali, and from Mount Rushmore to Boston National Historical Park, I have always loved exploring and appreciating the beauty, splendor and history of our national parks with my children, so when an opportunity presented itself to work for NPS, I happily took it. Consequently, I am now fortunate to have many worthwhile collaborative working relationships with diverse groups in an agency whose mission I value and appreciate.

I love the title of this magazine – **Connections**. Regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, political beliefs, etc., we are still connected; we are human, we have emotions, we have families (biological and/or chosen), we have friends - we are connected. The title of my column is “Reflections” and I will be writing on a myriad of topics capturing my reflections, your reflections – our reflections. I care tremendously about diversity, equity and inclusion. We are all in this together and that’s how it should be.



I am always continuously striving to do better and be better. I value learning and do my absolute best to learn from my mistakes. I enjoy learning more about others and we all have interesting stories to share. You may not agree with me and I respectfully may not agree with you; however, we can still learn from each other.

Admittedly, I am a huge Tom Brady fan and I could not resist posing next to his lifelike replica **[above]** during my visit to Boston, a city I love and enjoy visiting, and I always ensure to walk the [Freedom Trail](#) when I am there. Tommy may have abandoned one of my favorite cities to venture off to Tampa, but I will always think about him as part of the six-time Super Bowl-winning New England Patriots.

In the months to come, I will do my best to engage, entertain, inform, enlighten and appreciate you. Thank you for your time and I sincerely hope you join me on this journey while we walk on a path together towards reflecting and connecting.



Barbara Green is a member of the Connections Team and writes a monthly column entitled “Reflections.” Barbara welcomes your comments and suggestions for future issues. Please feel free to contact her at Barbara_Green@nps.gov.



Photo courtesy Jamaicans.com

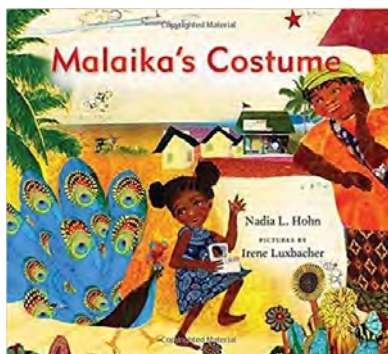
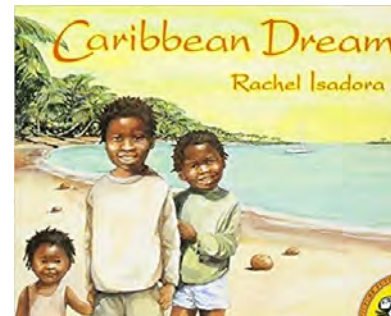


< [All the Way to Havana](#) by Margarita Engle

On a drive to Havana, Cuba, a young boy and his family enjoy the sights and sounds of the bustling city.

> [Caribbean Dream](#) by Rachel Isadora

Caribbean Dream celebrates the simple beauty of a West Indian island's landscape.

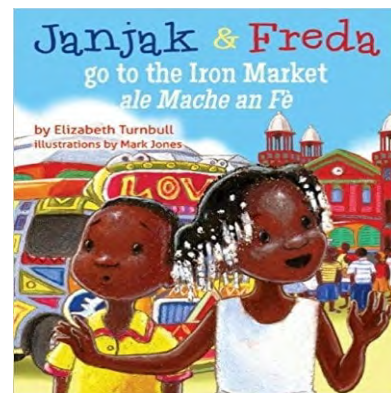


< [Malaika's Costume](#) by Nadia Hohn

After her mother moves to Canada to earn a better living for their family, Malaika and her grandmother find ways to continue important traditions, including making her costume for carnival.

> [Janjak & Freda Go to the Iron Market](#) by Elizabeth Turnbull

Cousins Janjak and Freda visit Haiti's well-known Iron Market and experience all of its joy and chaos.

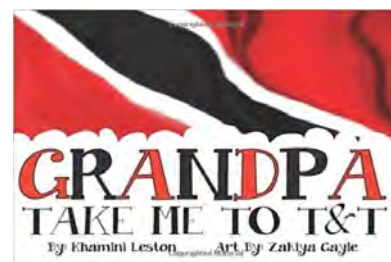


< [Malaika's Winter Carnival](#) by Nadia Hohn

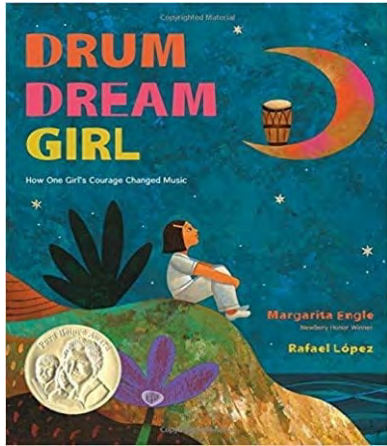
Malaika comes to terms with her new life in a new country that does not celebrate the customs and traditions she holds dear.

> [Grandpa Take Me to T&T](#) by Khamini Leston

A young boy from Brooklyn desperately wants to visit Trinidad & Tobago, his grandfather's home country.



Resources for Parents



< [Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music](#) by Margarita Engle

Drum Dream Girl tells the story of how Millo Castro Zaldarriaga defied Cuba's taboo against female drummers.

> [Tap-Tap](#) by Karen Lynn Williams

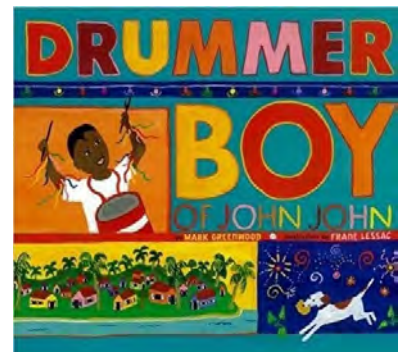
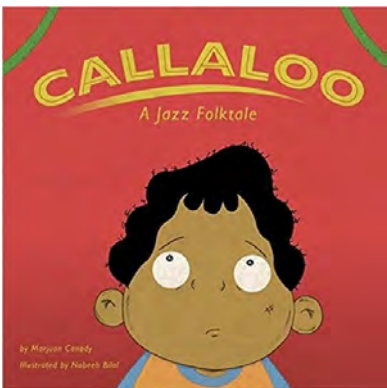
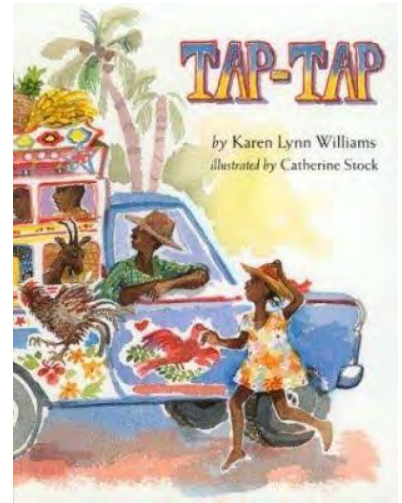
After a long day's work selling fruit in the market, Sasifi is excited to use her earnings on a tap-tap ride home.

< [Callaloo: A Jazz Folktale](#) by Marjuan Canady

A young boy, Winston, visits his aunt in Brooklyn to get her callaloo recipe, which transports him to the island of Tobago where mystery unfolds.

> [Drummer Boy of John John](#) by Mark Greenwood

Drummer Boy of John John is the story of Winston "Spree" Simon's early life in John John, Trinidad, and his development of the steel drum [see story, below].



Steel Drums



Winston "Spree" Simon [pictured, right] was a Trinidadian inventor, pioneer and musician. He was born in [Laventille, Trinidad](#) in 1930 and is credited with the invention of the Ping Pong steelpan instrument [pictured, left]. Simon also was part of the [Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra](#) and worked closely with Anthony Williams, who later invented the fourth and fifth soprano pan. Simon also gave [Bertie Marshall](#) significant impulses for his work in developing harmonical tuning. The American musician and composer [Van Dyke Parks](#) celebrated the life of Winston Simon in the song "Tribute to Spree" on his album Clang of the Yankee Reaper written and first recorded by [Lord Kitchener](#).

The steel drum is a tuned idiophone (an instrument that produces sound through vibrations) traditionally made from an oil drum but today is made of high-quality steel. To make a steel drum, also called a steelpan, the bottom of an oil drum is first pounded into a



bowl, then shaped and tuned with hammers to form distinct resonating surfaces.

In 1992, the steelpan became [Trinidad and Tobago's](#) national instrument. Popularity of the steel band has grown. They are now plentiful in Caribbean diaspora communities as well as non-Caribbean communities all over the world. While Trinidad and Tobago continues to be the center, countries like Sweden, Switzerland, and Japan are now hubs of steel band activity.

Image and text courtesy [Britannica](#)

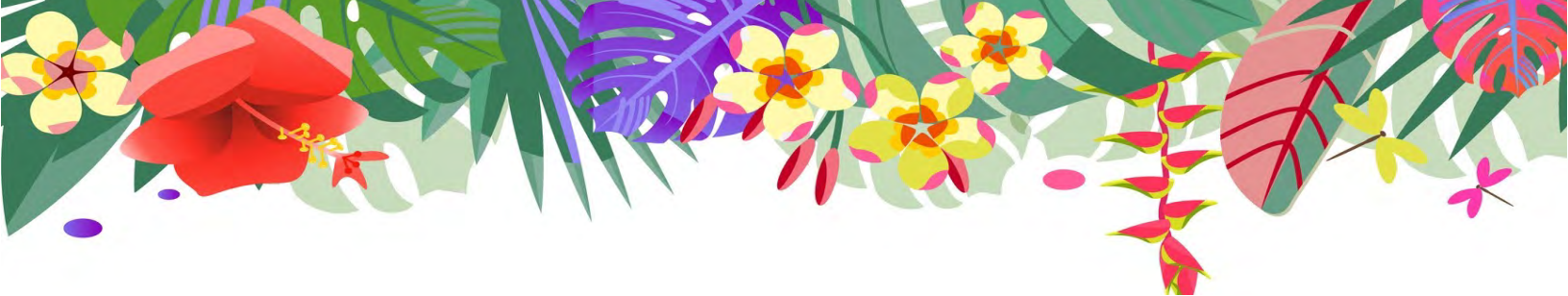


Connections Celebrates Our DOI Caribbean Family!



Pictured: Tatiana Ashley Muriel Luna of BLM in San Juan, Puerto Rico (meet Tatiana on page 25)





**Janice Piñero, Conservation and Conveyance Chief,
USBR, Sacramento, CA**

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

I would say coordinating with our sister federal agencies, state agencies and stakeholders to achieve restoration projects and also to best balance the Coordinated Operation of the [Central Valley Project](#) and the California [State Water Project](#).

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

My Puerto Rican heritage and identity guides how I approach my work and life in general. I strive to be warm, genuine and inclusive.

Who inspires you?

There are so many: Roberto Clemente, Tito Trinidad, Bob Marley, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Benicio del Toro, but right now I am in awe of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

[Dia de Reyes](#) is my favorite holiday. I love that we celebrate the Three Wise Men and that kids and adults get excited about receiving gifts under their beds after they leave grass in a box for the camels/horses to eat. It is a definitive extension of the Christmas season, which I love.

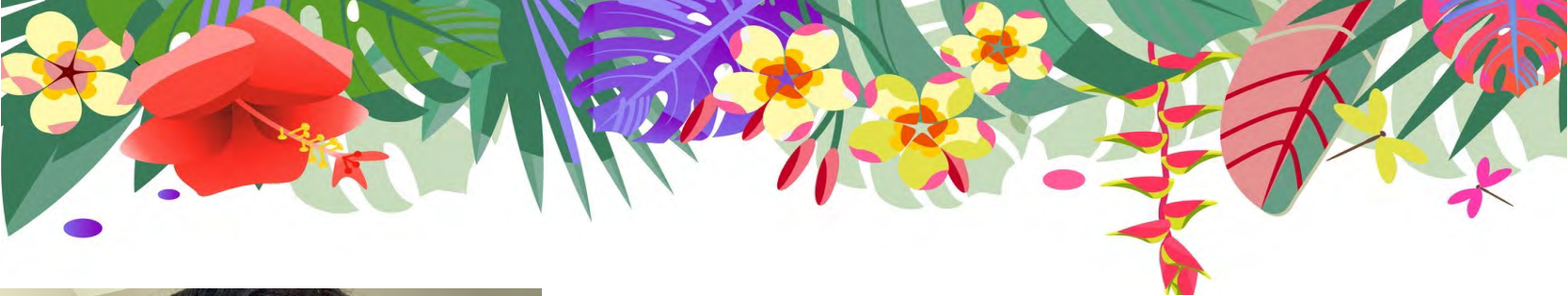
Favorite Family Recipe?

My beautiful mom used to prepare *mofongo* for us when she was able to.

[See recipe, next page]



***Above and on the cover:
Janice and her husband,
Bernardo Perez, daughters
Elena Sofia Perez (12 years
old) and Natalia Maria Perez
(3 years old). Left: children
being greeted by the Three
Wise Men in Puerto Rico.***



Valerie Stariha, Mechanical Engineer, USBR, Denver, CO

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

My biggest success is having a job where I know I am helping our communities. I just LOVE knowing that I helped bring water to our communities in a safe way.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I grew up on an island (Puerto Rico) where hurricanes and earthquakes can be devastating. This has made me understand how important it is to keep our infrastructure updated and safe for the public.

Who inspires you?

I would say my dad. He always believed in me and taught me to believe in myself. He also taught me that when you fail, you learn and try again.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

I always enjoyed Three Kings Days (January 6). We would go to my grandma’s house. I would set the hay in a shoebox the night before to feed the camels the Three Kings traveled with. When we woke up we had presents under the tree.

During the morning the Three Kings would be in a parade around the neighborhood streets and throw toys and candy at houses with little kids. It was so exciting as a kid and we always looked forward to it!

Favorite family recipe: Mofongo

Ingredients

3 cups canola oil for frying, 3 cloves garlic or to taste, 3 tablespoons olive oil, 1/8 cup crushed fried pork rinds, 2 green plantains, peeled and sliced into 1/2-inch rounds, salt to taste.

Directions

Step 1: Heat canola oil in a deep-fryer or large saucepan to 350 degrees F. Mash the garlic and olive oil with a mortar and pestle. Combine garlic mixture with the pork rinds in a large bowl; set aside.

Step 2: Fry the plantain chunks until golden and crispy, but not brown, about 15 minutes. Transfer the fried plantains into the bowl with the garlic mixture. Toss to coat. Mash the coated plantains with the mortar and pestle until smooth. Season with salt. Roll the plantain mixture into two large balls or several small balls before serving.

Serve with chicken, garlic shrimp or beef. Enjoy!





Angel DeJesus, Facility Management Software Systems Specialist, NPS, Gettysburg, PA

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

The beginning of my federal employment was at [Walter Reed National Medical Center](#) in Bethesda, MD. I was tasked with bringing online the U.S. Navy's facilities management program throughout the entire hospital. This involved working with the Joint Medical Logistics Functional Development Center team at Fort Detrick, MD, to be able to bring the program up to a fully-standalone interfaced program with the base contractor. I am still the only one to date to accomplish this feat at Walter Reed. I now have the honor to work at [Gettysburg National Military Park](#) and [Eisenhower National Historic Site](#) and manage their parks data systems.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I am honored to be of Puerto Rican descent. Growing up in a small town in Lancaster County, PA, we were the only Hispanic family in our entire school district and had to deal with the slang words and bullying. As I grew into adulthood and married life, it was difficult to see others receive positions in the workplace that I, too, was qualified for but not selected. Yet I determined that I would work harder and longer to achieve the positions that I wanted and earned. It is my life's experience that I am not a victim unless I allow myself to be one.

Who inspires you?

Surely my father was the biggest inspiration in my life growing up and in adulthood. He joined the military when he was just eighteen years old and fought in the Korean War, earning two Bronze Stars for valor and courage under fire protecting his fellow soldiers. He then came back to settle in the United States and worked at a local factory for years raising nine children. He taught me about life and how we can overcome adversity in all things in this life.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

One of the great things about being of the Hispanic culture is that we love our families and food! So, having a family meal together is always a real treat! Those meals could last for hours

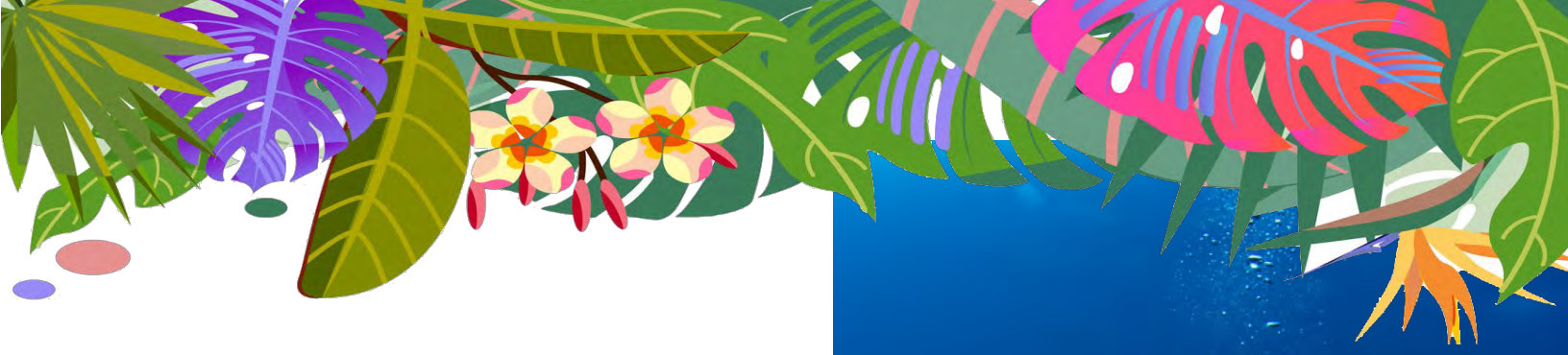


on end and were filled with music and laughter, storytelling, enjoying cup after cup of strong coffee, and dancing!

Favorite Family Recipe: Puerto Rican Rice and Beans

In a medium to large pot add the following: 2 large cans of kidney beans, 2 medium cans of tomato sauce, 1 medium can of diced tomatoes, 1 large diced onion, 2 packets of Saz'on Goya seasoning, Adobo with pepper according to taste and 3 tbsp of virgin olive oil. Bring all of this to a simmer over medium heat until the onions are soft and the beans, sauce, and seasonings are well blended, stirring occasionally to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pot. I usually cook it for around 30 minutes to let the flavor soak into the beans.

This is really good served over a hot bed of white rice. Enjoy!



Glauco Antonio Puig-Santana, Biological Science Technician (Aquatics), NPS, Kalaupapa National Historic Park, HI

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

The greatest success of my career has been all the programs, roves and conversations I have had in Spanish with the Hispanic/Latin communities in our National Parks. In addition, seeing my nuclear family and extended family enjoying the natural spaces more often.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I was born in Cuba; it is my identity - it is who I am - and using the lessons I have learned from my family growing up I continue to apply them every day.

Who inspires you?

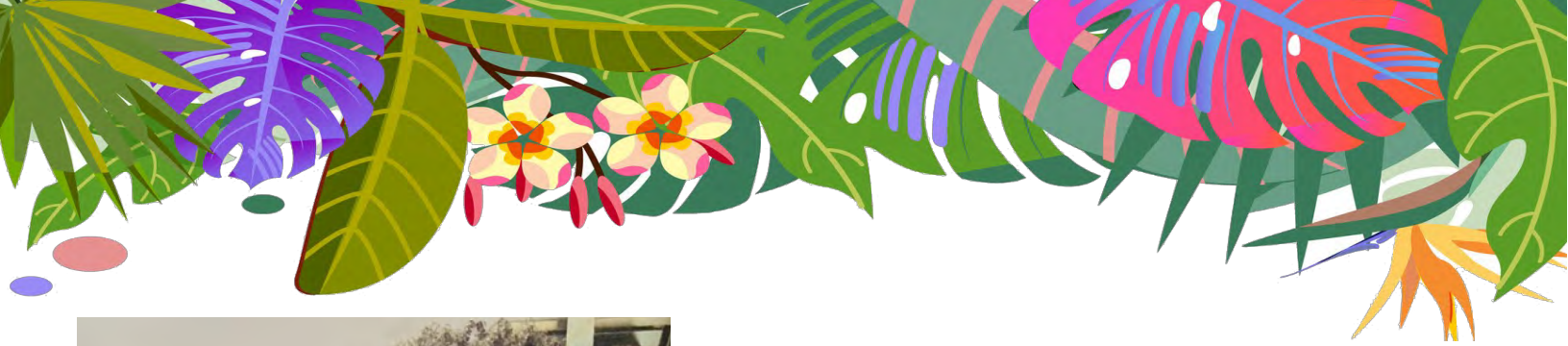
My grandfather, Sergio Porben, taught me when I was younger about cultivating hard work and the importance about having a global perspective of culture and applying it locally without forgetting about local knowledge.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

The first thing that comes to mind is being together around the dinner table telling stories and making [croquetas](#) from leftovers, which would happen especially after Noche Buena or Thanksgiving. Everybody had an assigned role making the batter, dipping in the eggs, breading, etc. There is always lots of laughter and love.

Favorite Family Recipe: Arantitas de Platano

So easy! Thinly slice a *plátano macho* (*big plantain*), batter with a bit of egg scramble, salt and chopped garlic and fry it up.



Jerry L. Lightfoot, Drug Program Specialist, Interior Business Center, Main Interior Building, Washington, DC

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

The greatest success of my federal career occurred on the military side, wherein I had the honor and privilege to serve this great nation in combat. A great success on the civilian side has been getting selected to the IBC Emerging Leaders Program.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

Being Caribbean-American has given me a broader perspective on so much. On my father's side, my cousins and I are first-generation Americans. We are truly shining examples of the American Dream.

Who inspires you?

I may be a tad bit biased in my response, but the person who most inspires me is my dad. He did whatever it took to make sure he was able to get his family and himself from Trinidad to America. As a way to gain citizenship he even joined the military. All his countless contributions and life lessons are greatly appreciated.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

Carnival used to always be a huge celebration at my home and my dad's siblings' homes as well. It would be a weeklong party from sun up to sun down. I always loved this time of year because all my cousins would come over and we would have GREAT food!

Trinidad and Tobago Carnival



[The Trinidad and Tobago Carnival](#) is an annual event held on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday in Trinidad and Tobago. The event is well known for participants' colorful costumes and exuberant celebrations. It is said that if the islanders are not celebrating Carnival, then they are preparing for it while reminiscing about the past year's festival. Traditionally, the festival is associated with calypso music, but recently [Soca](#) music has replaced calypso as the most celebrated type of music. Costumes (sometimes called "mas"), stick-fighting and limbo competitions are also important components of the festival.

Pictured, left: revelers at 2019's Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. Last year's and this year's carnivals were cancelled due to COVID-19. Image and text courtesy [Britannica](#)



**Tatiana Ashley Muriel Luna, Public Affairs Officer/
Multimedia Specialist, BLM, Eastern States, VA**

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

I would say it’s making a difference in the day-to-day communication planning by using my background and language to attribute a new perspective on topics. I seek to provide a connection between cultures translating content in multiple languages to provide equal opportunity for the public to stay informed about hot topics within DOI’s priorities. It also fills me with great pride being the only female in my office to have Caribbean heritage. Seeing how the office culture supports the growth of a more diverse group is satisfying.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I have worked extra hard to complete goals that could allow me to be where I am today. Being Caribbean-American has allowed me to build a bridge between Puerto Rico and Virginia to balance language, culture and mindset to communicate complex topics in ways that are understandable to multiple communities.

Who inspires you?

The everyday people of Puerto Rico have a charm and friendly character that inspires me to be the best version of myself.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

Coffee is grown on the island of Puerto Rico in the tallest hillsides and deepest forests where humidity and wind make a blissful blend. Every four years we set out to visit the *finca* (coffee farm) to learn how the process of collecting, roasting and packaging coffee has changed. Hurricane seasons affect the success rate of tree growth and require changes to coffee bean production. It takes four generations of trees to start growing the best quality of coffee bean. Once the beans are picked and roasted we get to prepare the best cup of coffee in a campfire at the farm in a leisurely gathering that lasts until sunset. After a hard day in the fields, nothing feels more rewarding! And of course we pack some beans to take home with us so we can continue to enjoy the greatest coffee.



Favorite Family Recipe: Shrimp Soup

Shrimp soup has short grain rice, angel hair pasta, potatoes, carrots, onions and fried plantains. My grandma would not give me the recipe, but I know the trick is flavoring the soup with adobo seasoning and cooking with love. [\[Traditional recipe here\]](#)



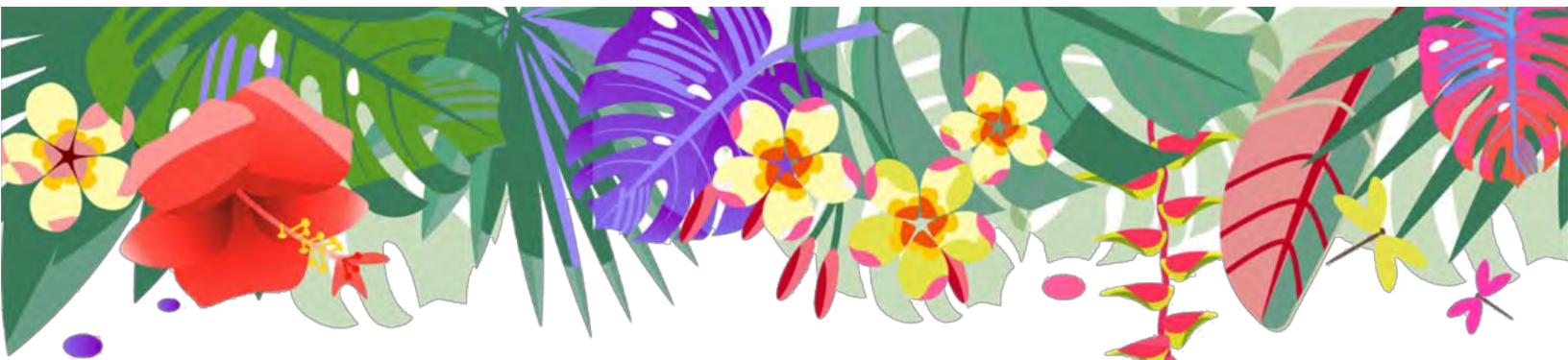


Puerto Rico's coffee industry has made a huge comeback since Hurricane Maria. Puerto Rico's coffee zone is comprised of 10 coffee plantations spanning much of the island, and visitors are welcome to learn more about the confluence of traditional farming

methods and environmental factors that result in some of the best coffee beans in the world. One of these plantations, [Finca del Seto](#) in Jayuya, PR is a small, rural, traditional coffee farm growing almost everything in their rich soil – from pineapples and macadamias to

cinnamon trees, orchids, a vegetable garden, and, of course, coffee.

Left: a hillside coffee plantation. Right: a gentleman harvesting coffee beans. Images and text courtesy Finca del Seto



Roland Blackman, Attorney Advisor, Office of the Solicitor, Washington, DC

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

My greatest success has been helping my client, the National Park Service, fulfill its mission.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

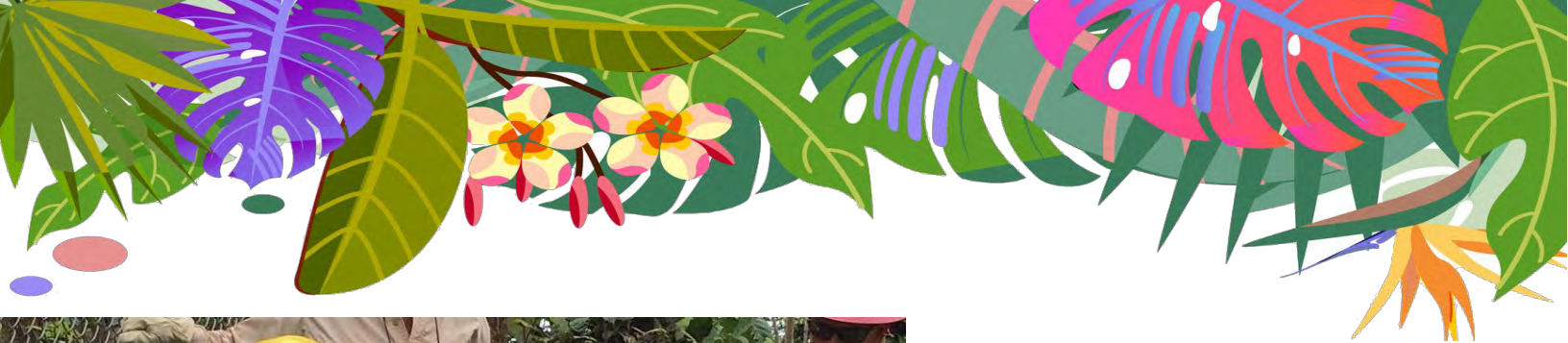
It is a source of pride and community. People within this community mentored and shaped my world view. I wouldn't be a lawyer today without them.

Who inspires you?

My father, because I know what he sacrificed to migrate to America. He is well past retirement age, but has the work ethic of an ant. His desire for constant self-improvement is my life model.

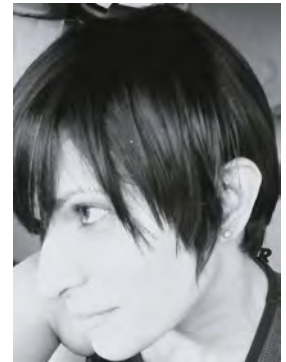
What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

I love the music that we sing at gatherings. In my family, when someone dies drums are played and certain village songs are sung. The songs remind me of my childhood and reconnects me to memories of my extended family.



Marisel Lopez Flores, Deputy Field Supervisor, FWS, Puerto Rico

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?



I work with species that are in critically low numbers and to finally see progress and to have been successful in the recovery of species after the devastation of Hurricane Maria has been so gratifying. Even though we lost all the wild animal population, we were resilient and continue working hard towards full recovery.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I have lived on the Island all my life and there are so many wonderful programs and nature that are worth protecting, enhancing and managing.

Who inspires you?

Antonia Novello de Coello [left]. Dr. Novello was a vice admiral in the [Public Health Service Commissioned Corps](#) and served as 14th Surgeon General of the United States. As a Puerto Rican woman who had the honor to serve in that position, Dr. Novello inspired me as a woman to believe that we all can make a difference and we can achieve any dream we set our mind to accomplish.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

Celebrating with family members and gathering together, no matter the occasion. We enjoy each moment!



Dr. Antonia Novello Coello, born in Farjardo, Puerto Rico, was the first woman and the first Hispanic to become Surgeon General of the United States (1990 to 1993).

Dr. Novello suffered throughout her childhood from a medical condition that could only be corrected with surgery. Because her family could not afford the long trip to the surgical hospital, she spent

part of every summer getting interim treatment in a local hospital. It was only after two surgeries, at age 18 and 20, that the condition was finally corrected. By the time she was a teenager she had resolved to be a physician so that she could help other sick children.

More Image and text courtesy [Britannica](#)



**Felix H. Lopez Arroyo, Ecologist/
Contaminants Specialist, FWS, Caribbean
Ecological Services Field Office, Puerto Rico**

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

Seeing conservation efforts start off small and slowly bloom into a movement. I saw that happen in the Caribbean with sea turtles and manatee conservation.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

I'm resilient: no power, no water, hurricanes, earthquakes, no problem.

Who inspires you?

[Eugenio Maria de Hostos](#) [see below], known as the Great Citizen of the Americas. He was an educator, philosopher, intellectual, lawyer, sociologist, novelist and women's rights advocate.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

In Puerto Rico we celebrate Three Kings Day, January 6. It's like a second Christmas day, with celebration, gifts and family gatherings.

Favorite family recipe: Coquito (aka PR eggnog)

In a blender mix 1 can Coco Lopez Coconut Cream, 1 can Coconut milk, 1/2 can of condensed milk and 1/2 can of evaporated milk. Top off with white rum. Chill well; add cinnamon to taste.



Eugenio María de Hostos



Eugenio María de Hostos was a Puerto Rican educator, writer and patriot, born in 1839 in Río Cañas, Mayagüez. Hostos attended school in Mayagüez and San Juan and studied law in Spain where he fought to liberalize Spain's colonial rule of Cuba and Puerto Rico. He opposed all forms of slavery and fought arduously to abolish slavery in Cuba and Puerto Rico. In 1869, he left Madrid for New York City where he joined other exiles in the struggle for the liberation of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Hostos was a man who dedicated his life to progress, education and justice—passionately committed to human rights and personal dignity. He vigorously championed reforms in politics, law, social mores and education. His extensive travels throughout the United States, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean provided him firsthand contact with the social and economic injustice and struggles taking place in many countries. *Image and text courtesy [Hostos Community College](#)*



Shalini Gopie, Regional Digital and Interpretive Media Specialist, NPS, Interior Regions 8, 9, 10 and 12, San Francisco, CA

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

As a kid, I watched Sesame Street and loved when Ernie and Bert made an appearance. In 2013, I had an opportunity to participate in a collaboration with the National Park Service and Sesame Workshop. It was a dream come true to spend time with Elmo and Murray to film three segments featuring [Gateway National Recreation Area](#).

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

My large family was a constant reminder of who I am and where I came from. I didn't learn to appreciate the stories, food, and traditions until I moved farther away from my family and my roots in New York City. I often call my mom for recipes when I feel disconnected. My cooking is still a work in progress since every measurement requires your hand or fingers.

In 2020, I purchased Caribbean-authored books on indentured servitude to learn more about the journey my great-great-grandparents made from India to Trinidad. This discovery is also a work in progress.

Who inspires you?



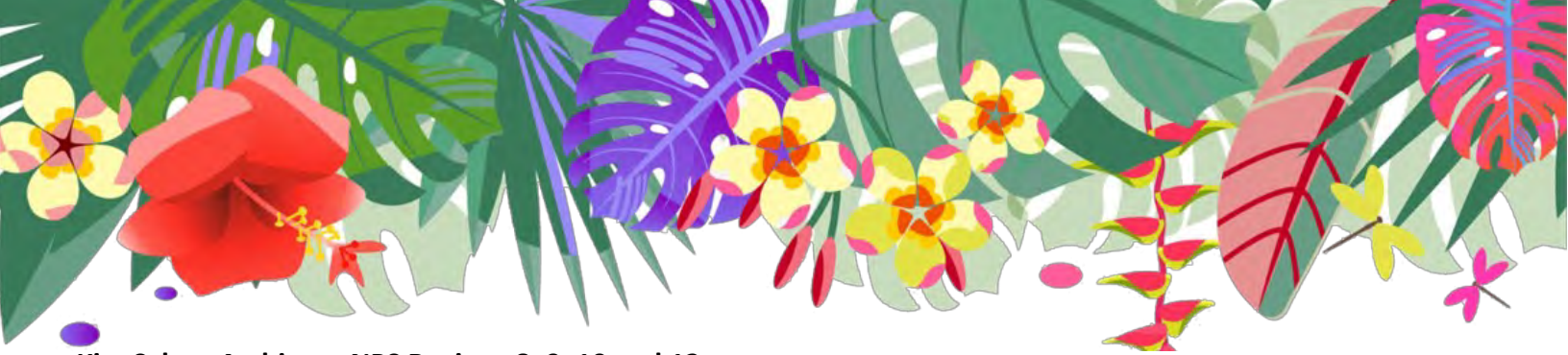
Maya Angelou [*left—photo courtesy mayaangelou.com*] is at the top of my list for many reasons beyond her powerful poems and the countless times *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* landed on my summer reading list. Did you know Angelou was San Francisco's first African-American female cable car conductor, had a successful career singing calypso, and was a passionate Civil Rights activist? I admire her accomplishments and resilience. I didn't learn about her Trinidadian roots until recently.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

As a birthday request or special occasion, I always ask my mom to make macaroni pie (baked mac and cheese). I've attempted to recreate the dish many times, but it's never like mom's cooking. Her secret ingredient is a bread crumb topping with an absurd amount of butter. Every time we get together, she knows what is on the menu. It's the one dish I hope to create a solid recipe for and pass on to my niece.



Above: Shalini and retired U.S. Park Police K-9 Kody in front of [San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park's Maritime Museum](#); with her Sesame Street friends.



Kim Sykes, Architect, NPS Regions 8, 9, 10 and 12, San Francisco, CA

What would you say was the greatest success of your federal career?

I'm a historical architect by training and my past work has focused on restoring and rehabilitating historic structures. My greatest success is making people feel included and making them smile through the planning, design and construction process. Yes, I've had successful building projects in beautiful parks, but when I see how happy the managers, staff and visitors are with the new building space, the new view, the improved staff and visitor experience - THAT is really what makes me proud of the work that I do. If we came in on budget and on time, well, that's a success as well, but nothing beats seeing a restored area activated with and enjoyed by smiling happy people.

How has being Caribbean-American affected your life?

My maternal heritage is rooted in Guyana, South America and Barbados and I am very drawn to this culture. My grandfather, John Wilson, Sr., was born one of 11 children and he came to this country from Georgetown, Guyana to work and save money to bring his other brothers and sisters to follow. I know that my successes today are the dreams and wishes of my ancestors and I try to do my best to honor them in everything that I do. My grandparents' home in the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens, NY was the center of family life and we gathered there for birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. They had an apartment in the attic that they rented to young women from the Caribbean and so I loved hearing them speak in that sweet accent and tone. Family and Caribbean culture is

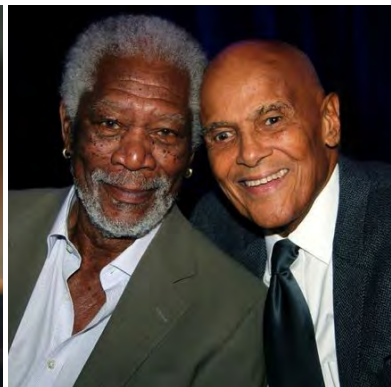
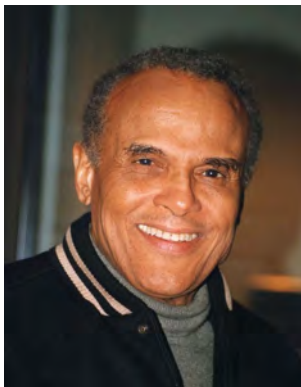


very important to me. My Uncle Johnny (John Wilson, Jr.), was the family archivist and historian, having traced our roots back to the 1840s. He passed away earlier this year and it has been very hard to fill his shoes and carry on without him as our elder family history authority. It is my calling and my time to rise in service to my family to continue the legacy of our Caribbean, African and European ancestors.

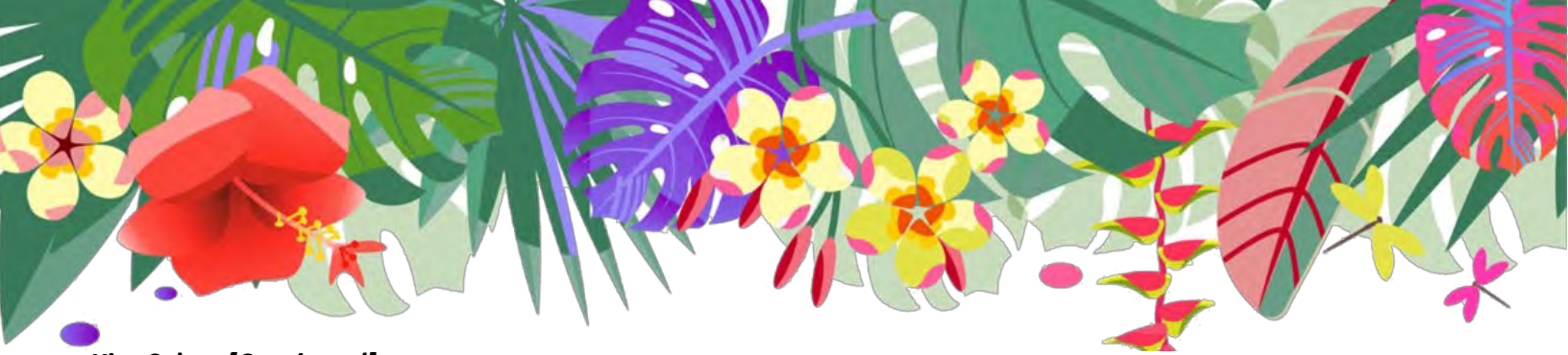
Who inspires you?

I grew up listening to Harry Belafonte **[pictured, below]** on my parents' record player and so his singing voice was a big part of my childhood memories (his being a guest on the Muppet Show in the 70s was everything!). I only learned later in life how important a supporter of the civil rights movement he was in the Sixties, keeping good company with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Later he supported USA for Africa and was a UNICEF goodwill ambassador for juvenile justice. He's 94 and still an inspiration for his contributions in music, film, and philanthropy.

[Continued]



Images courtesy [Britannica](#)



Kim Sykes [Continued]

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to you and your family?

I grew up with a Guyanese stewed dish called Pepper Pot made from [Cassareep](#), a thick black liquid made from cassava root. It's a dish made around the holidays and it was my favorite because of the sweetness of the sauce and the tenderness of the meat. My grandmother and my mother also made Cod Fish Cakes (like crab cakes, but with salted dried cod which is soaked to rehydrate the fish). I always remember my grandmother's wrinkled hands covered in fish shredding the larger pieces into fine threads while she had me add the eggs and a little thyme.

When I was young, I did not have a taste for my mom's hot pepper sauce, but I have since come to appreciate its flavor and use it sparingly on some fish dishes. She takes a basic pepper sauce from the West Indian market and elevates it with finely chopped onion, mustard powder and other spices. Hot pepper sauce is an art in the Caribbean. Everyone has their specific take on it. My mom's yellow pepper sauce has a kick that I am still acquiring a taste for and a little goes a LONG way for me, though my dad will use it like mustard or ketchup and layer it on! Though we never made them from scratch in our family, we'd hit up the Jamaican store for beef meat patties whenever possible. Sometimes, we'd get coco bread with it to soften the spicy meat mixture.

A soda called Cola Champagne was also something I remember from my childhood with family in Queens, NY. It's the stickiest sweetest soda that is a golden color and is non-alcoholic. Food was always the center of every family gathering and I cherish the memories of that time and the recipes from my Caribbean heritage.

Favorite family recipe: Guyanese Pepper Pot

Recipe from **Kim Sykes**, daughter of **Marion Sykes**, daughter of **Eleanor Wilson**, daughter of **Florence Forde**.

- 3 lbs. oxtails
- 1/2 cup [cassareep](#)
- 12 whole cloves
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2-3 hot peppers crushed
- Dash of salt

Cover meat with water and bring to boil. Skim off foam, then add other ingredients to meat. Bring to boil again and simmer about 2-3 hours. Add salt at the end and more sugar to taste. Serve with bread to dip into the stew. Enjoy!



[Above: Cassareep. Far left: Guyanese Pepper Pot. Near left: Cola Champagne. Photos from Wikipedia.]



Sheri Gayle, Self-Determination Specialist, BIA, Midwest Regional Office, Bloomington, MN

Who inspires you?

My son Adewale (it means “the crown has come home”). We call him Ade (“Ah-Day”). It’s a Nigerian-Yoruban African name, in the spirit of repatriation. Even though Ade is only 18 months old and has yet to go to **yaad** (Jamaica), he is a **yaadi**. He eats all of Jamaica’s traditional foods and national dishes such as [ackee and saltfish](#), [callaloo](#), [tuff crackers](#) (great to teethe on), and even habaneros (substituted for scotch bonnets). He tries to "ding" other kids’ thumbs at the playground when he says hello, and always moves his dancing feet. Thanks go to my husband for making sure my son knows his Jamaican heritage.

What Caribbean tradition is most meaningful to your family?

When far away from home or teaching your Jamaican American son about traditions back home, you must share the national dishes, eat [bun and cheese](#) on Easter, make fresh [sea moss](#) for your health, and source green bananas (no, not the green ones at the supermarket, lol) for [green banana porridge](#).

Food is often the most important tradition of everyday life for us as a family, because it’s the smells and tastes of Jamaica. Enjoying them while listening to beautiful Jamaican music transports us to **yaad** even when it is winter in the states.



Flan de Calabaza (Pumpkin Flan)

From **Yadira Soto-Viruet, Physical Scientist-Country Specialist, Global Mineral Analysis, USGS National Minerals Information Center, Reston, VA**

I would like to submit my mom's *flan de calabaza* recipe. My mom passed away around five years ago, and this was our favorite dessert. Every time that I prepare this flan at home it reminds so much of her and my childhood back in Puerto Rico. We used to use homegrown pumpkin from our garden and our secret ingredient was love.



Ingredients

Caramel

- 1 cup of sugar
- 2 tablespoons of water

Flan

- 1 cup of pumpkin (peeled, seeded, boiled, and mashed)
- 1 cup of sugar
- 3 eggs
- 12 fl oz can evaporated milk
- 14 fl oz can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

Directions

Preheat oven to 350°. Combine the sugar and water in a heavy saucepan. Place the saucepan over low heat and stir with a spoon until the sugar has dissolved and the syrup looks completely clear (like water).

Once the syrup is clear, stop stirring and heat up to medium and allow the syrup to come to a boil. Slowly allow the syrup to caramelize, then pour into the bottom of an 8-inch round cake pan.



Yadira and her beautiful mom Nilsa E. Viruet-Rios at Mount Vernon, VA.

In a blender, mix all the flan ingredients at medium speed for about a minute, until you see some foam on the top of the mix. Add mix on top of the caramel. Place the cake pan inside a large pan with water in order to make your own [Baño de Maria](#). Place the Baño de Maria inside the oven and bake for about an hour. Insert a knife in the center of the flan; if it comes out clean, your flan is ready. Cool completely before serving. Enjoy!

★ VETERAN SPOTLIGHT ★



Abner Devallon, Jr.

Colonel, U.S. Air Force

Abner Devallon Jr. is the Chief of the Acquisition Policy and Oversight Division in the Interior Business Center. Mr. Devallon also serves as the Competition Advocate for the Office of the Secretary. As Policy Division Chief, he leads a team of federal and contracting professionals delivering responsive, agile and mission-enabling acquisition support to the federal government. His team ensures compliant contracting and exceptional customer service through robust acquisition policy and oversight programs. The Acquisition Oversight and Policy Division enables IBC's full spectrum acquisition support to varied DOI missions and over 35 other federal agencies.

Mr. Devallon is a career acquisition professional who joined the Interior Business Center after a 27-year career in the United States Air Force. Mr. Devallon was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and his family moved to Miami, Florida in 1973. He is a graduate of Florida State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications and Language and Troy State University (now Troy University) with a Master of Science degree.

Mr. Devallon is a huge football and basketball fan! His favorite teams are the Florida State Seminoles, Miami Dolphins, and Miami Heat. He also loves to travel, experiencing different foods and cultures. He is a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Mr. Devallon is married to his high school sweetheart and they have three young adult children.

HONOR ★ VALOR ★ SERVICE

The DOI Veterans Resource Group is here for you. Please reach out to doi_vets@ios.doi.gov



<https://fedsfeedfamilies.ocio.usda.gov/>

Feds Feed Families is a government-wide campaign which encourages federal employees to give to food banks and pantries. This year's campaign ends August 31. Get involved today!



Voices for Change



**Cynthia Baca, Human Resources Specialist,
Interior Business Center, Lakewood, CO**

[Editor's note: July 26, 2021 marked the 31st anniversary of the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), (42 U.S.C. § 12101), the landmark civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability, requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation to employees with disabilities, and mandates accessibility requirements for public accommodations. We asked our colleague Cynthia Baca to share her thoughts on this important occasion.]

1. How has the ADA affected your career and life?

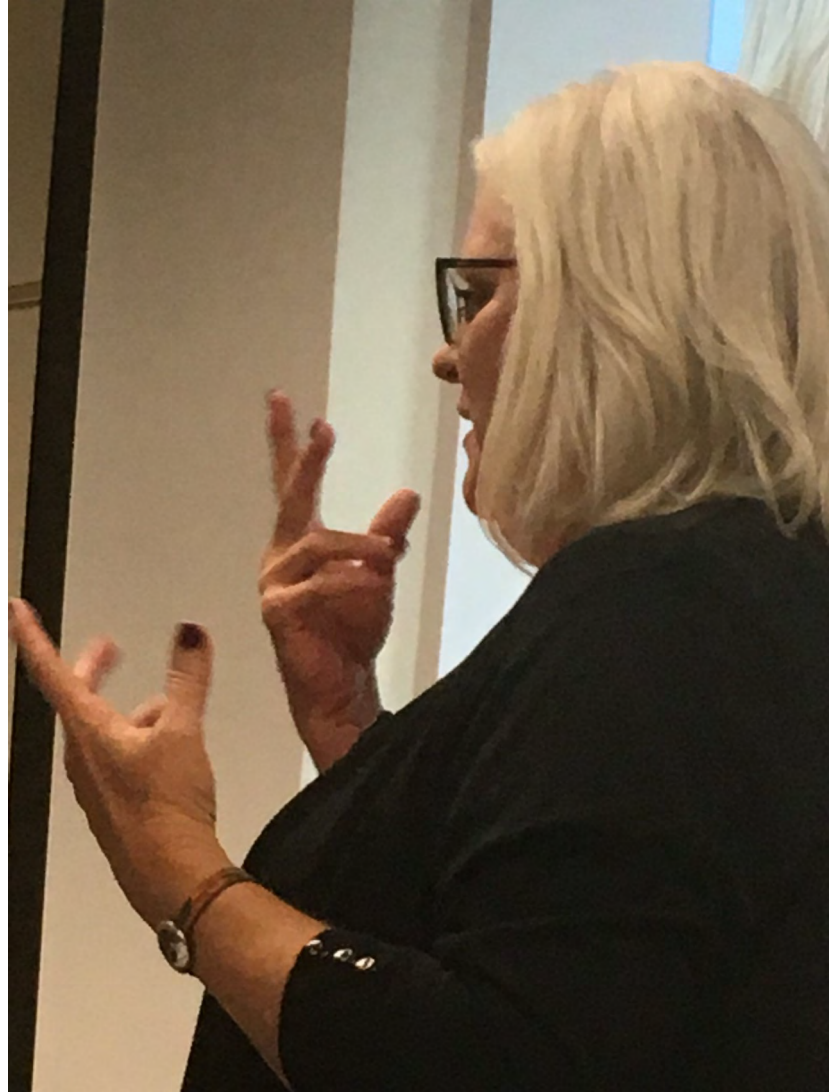
This ADA law has helped me and still helps me being an abled person in my career and life by feeling safe with its protection from being discriminated in a way. Especially having a sign language interpreter in work meetings and personal medical meetings with doctors upon request without having to fight for it. I am so grateful for the close captioning and relay service being available to me for the past 31 years.

What has been the biggest impact of the ADA for persons with different abilities?

I am not sure, but I know most of the time the abled people respect and know that this important civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as the abled people.

What changes to the ADA would you like to see implemented in the years to come?

I think it would be awesome for this law be a training requirement course for all types of public workers. Also, I would love this law to be international law not only in the U.S. because some other countries do not have that human right protection.



Above: Cynthia Baca leading a presentation for Interior Business Center employees in 2019 regarding best practices to support deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the workplace.

ADA 31



Americans with Disabilities Act

Celebrate the ADA! July 26, 2021

Keeping the Conversation Going



CONNECTIONS THIRD THURSDAYS ZOOM 3:00 PM EASTERN

Each month, the **Connections** Team conducts a roundtable discussion as a follow up to that month's issue. Although speakers and panelists will vary, the roundtable discussions will be a safe and respectful place to discuss the content, ask questions of the team and share ideas, insights and stories to keep the conversation going.

Please join us! Just click on the date/time to register. Thank you!

September	Hispanic American Heritage Month	Thursday, September 16, 2021 at 3:00 PM Eastern
October	Disability Employment Awareness Month	Thursday, October 21, 2021 at 3:00 PM Eastern
November	Native American Heritage Month	Thursday, November 18, 2021 at 3:00 PM Eastern
December	Holiday Traditions from Around the World	Thursday, December 16, 2021 at 3:00 PM Eastern

Connections Magazine for September



*Connections Magazine is a monthly publication produced under the co-executive sponsorship of **Jacqueline M. Jones**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administrative Services, and **Erica White-Dunston**, Director, Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Civil Rights.*

Your input is essential to making this a valuable resource for all employees. Please feel free to share your ideas, suggestions and articles/pictures with editor Stephen Carlisle at Stephen_Carlisle@ibc.doi.gov. Thank you!

Views and conclusions contained in this work are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the U.S. Government. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute their endorsement by the U.S. Government.



Interior's Employee Assistance Program provider, **Espyr**, is here for employees and their dependents. **Espyr** provides confidential counseling and consultation at no cost via telephone or other

virtual means. A live counselor is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 800-869-0276 or visit [espyr.com](https://www.espyr.com) (Password: InteriorEAP).

Connections

Inclusion. Equity. Respect.



The Connections Team is an engaged group of talented volunteers from across Interior who produce Connections Magazine, sponsor roundtable discussions and seek to foster greater understanding around inclusion, equity and respect. [We would love to hear from you!](#)