

URL: <https://ecorner-prod.tcg.stanford.edu/in-brief/weathering-the-storms/>

Catherine Berman, co-founder of fintech startup CNote, explains how extreme volatility as an AmeriCorps volunteer helped her develop the resilience that she relies on today as a business leader. Drawn to social causes at an early age, Berman says the year she spent in Puerto Rico taught her about overcoming challenges and resolving personal conflicts with compassion.



## Transcript

- So after college, as many of my friends moved to big cities chasing big paychecks, I decided to move to Puerto Rico and served in AmeriCorps for a year.. I had always had a very deep feeling of social justice, and probably coming from a background of seeing a lot of things and wanted to use my Spanish in a way I thought could do some social good.. So I moved to Puerto Rico and instantly experienced another delightful period of other.. So I spoke Spanish, could definitely relate to folks, and yet every single person in my 30 person AmeriCorps office called me Gringa and wanted nothing to do with me.. Because from their impression, I was the rich American coming down and [Foreign Language] didn't want nothing to do with what was going on in their place.. And so that feeling of isolation and loneliness of other, despite trying to do good, crept right back in front of me.. And so I will stop and say that one year in Puerto Rico as a recent college graduate, was one of the most challenging years of my entire life, to date.. Why? To give some examples, I'm there for two weeks.. Our supervisor of these 30 folks in this AmeriCorps department, who had been revered, and one of the reasons I chose that part of the AmeriCorps experience down there, decides to leave.. So now we're without supervisor and complete chaos..

The next six months, our whole office had weekly turnarounds of new supervisors, including a few drug addicts and alcoholics amidst them.. Secondly, I was sent down there to start a literacy program.. In a couple months time, I was told I had to start a home assist program.. In a couple months time, I was told I was now going to be doing an economic development program.. And about halfway through my AmeriCorps experience, Hurricane George it.. Now Hurricane George is nothing as bad as what we've just seen.. But imagine being someone who has never experienced a hurricane.. I came from earthquake country.. It was crazy.. It was frightening, and after we got over the other side of it, I'd now become a translator for FEMA..

See, FEMA at the time had not sent down enough bi-lingual translators and so many poor parts of the island were destroyed.. And so I got in a truck, in my hardhat and toured Puerto Rico, trying to help as much as I can bring relief to these families.. A lot of the challenges of that year had to do with that feeling.. That feeling of being different, that feeling of not being accepted despite really good intentions.. But what I learned from all that, and for any of you who can relate and have come out on the other side, is you learn such a thick skin, so much resilience not to let what people say about you define who you are.. Lastly, I'll share one of my favorite experiences from Puerto Rico which was one of the women who didn't like me in the office because I was coming from the mainland, decided to start a rumor that I was sleeping with one of the other worker's husband.. Who, by the way, was 20 years my senior.. And so I ended up confronting this woman who started the rumor.. We ended up getting into an incredible exchange, and by the end of my one year experience was actually an incredibly good friend.. To date, I've contacted her for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico..

But, again, starting from that place of challenge, being able to move to a place of compassion, what was she thinking and fearing that would cause her to do this? Going to a place of direct communication and the coming out the other side was not easy, but absolutely was worth it..