

POINT OF VIEW

El Nuevo Dia

By **Kathy Gannett**

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Viequenses in danger of extinction

On May 1, we celebrate a great victory: 20 years without bombing in Vieques. But can we really celebrate while high **cancer rates, gentrification, and gun violence decimate our communities and herald a Vieques without Viequenses?** If its growing inequalities are not addressed, the island municipality faces a grim future.

Decades of peaceful protests led to the closure of the US military base on May 1, 2003. Undoubtedly, the Viequense population's exposure to toxic waste and its health risks have dramatically decreased. However, the continuous Open air detonations and the inadequate cleaning of the former bombing area continue to make the population sick and deteriorate the environment. **Vieques demands a safe and complete cleanup, as well as the return of its lands and the fulfillment of the promised sustainable development,** that is, an economy that meets the needs of the local population, including housing, well-paid jobs, medical care, quality education, decent maritime transportation, and public security with a healthy natural environment.



Decades of peaceful protests led to the closure of the US military base on May 1, 2003. (JUAN LUIS MARTINEZ)

Vieques is under siege. Instead of government planning and regulations, foreign capital is turning entire neighborhoods into vacation rentals without restrictions and displacing the local population. Instead of imposing limits, the central and municipal governments provide tax exemptions and allow construction on the coasts and mangroves, the dominance of housing and tourism by outside commercial interests, and low-paid employment. Only two Puerto Rican-owned restaurants remain on the boardwalk, and the rest often do not serve Spanish-speaking clientele.

The land grab continues. Since 2003, property buyers have been mostly from the U.S. In the last four years, at least 57 properties have been sold in my small neighborhood of Esperanza. Most of the sellers were Viequenses, but fewer than five properties were purchased by Viequenses. With a poverty rate hovering near

50%, our residents can't compete for homes that typically cost more than \$300,000 or pay monthly rents of \$1,000 or more.

Typically, buyers convert their properties into vacation rentals, adding to the already high inventory of 190 tourist accommodations in Esperanza alone, where there are another 16 properties for sale. With so much transitional housing, the social fabric of the community is in shreds. Most Viequenses do not benefit from the wealth generated by the tourism economy, being relegated to the construction, maintenance, and cleaning of tourist properties.

In addition, **an unchecked wave of murders is devastating our population.** Many studies show that extreme income inequality, due to the arrival of wealthier residents, is correlated with increased homicide rates. More than 100 Viequenses have been killed since 2006, with seven homicides in the last nine months. Very few of these crimes have been solved or kept in the public eye. The government of Puerto Rico does not want to scare away foreign investment and foreign tourism with the reality of our crisis.

We must recognize that many foreign buyers, including those who become full-time residents, represent an economically privileged group. As a white immigrant, the Puerto Rican people have always made me feel welcome, both in my hometown of Boston and during my 23 years on Vieques. **We should not be afraid to talk about how newcomers can become conscientious citizens of Puerto Rico** and help the nation prosper.

As many already do, they can contribute time and money to the important work of nonprofit organizations on Vieques. But that is not enough. Will buyers and sellers who make substantial profits fund a community land trust to develop affordable housing and preserve homes for Viequenses? **Will they be able to**

leave self-segregation behind and immerse themselves in the history, culture, and language of Puerto Rico? Will they be able to join our “Vieques No Se Vende” campaign without feeling personally attacked?

The people of Vieques will not rest until they are owners and beneficiaries of the development of Isla Nena. The war games are over, **but the fight for justice continues!**

Kathy Gannett spent 21 days in federal prison for trespassing in the US Navy bombing zone in 2001. For more information on Vieques and its current struggles, you can access her website. www.justiceforvieques.org