

## LONG ISLAND / NASSAU

**Valley Stream teen who survived hurricane reflects at prom**

Jennifer Parker and her date, Aaron Worley, enjoy Valley Stream Central High School's senior prom at Bridgeview Yacht Club in Island Park on May 23. Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

**By Marlo Jappen**

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While her classmates snacked on hors d'oeuvres and snapped photos in front of a multi-tiered water fountain, Jennifer Parker took a break from prom fun at the Bridgeview Yacht Club to remember when she captured rainwater to use for baths.

Parker, a senior at Valley Stream Central High School, was living in Yauco, Puerto Rico, when hurricane Maria hit in September 2017. She and her family — her younger siblings, mother and stepfather — sprawled out on air mattresses in the basement of their home and dealt with widespread power outages and no cell service.

"It was traumatizing," said Parker, 18, during the prom in Island Park on May 23. "I'm afraid that it'll happen again."

— About a month after the storm, she moved to Valley Stream, where she lives with her stepfather, Pedro Acosta, her maternal grandparents and brother David, a sophomore at Valley Stream Central.

Jennifer grew up in Valley Stream and attended school there until she moved to Puerto Rico in the 10th grade as part of her family's pursuit of an affordable home. She had already planned to return to New York to attend college, but the transition of moving back following the hurricane was a difficult one.

She navigated through a whirlwind of college applications and standardized tests, all while coping with being far away her mom, Jennifer Gonzalez, and 5-year-old sister Natasha, who stayed in Puerto Rico. Acosta also plans to return to Puerto Rico soon, but Jennifer and David have no plans to go back because they fear another storm.

"It was really stressful at first," Jennifer said of returning to Long Island. "It felt like I had no one."

She keeps in touch with her family on video chat via Facebook Messenger.

"Sometimes my little sister does these little dances," Parker laughs. "She's my motivation."

Parker has also found a support system here, which includes her best friend, Lauren Jones, her boyfriend, Aaron Worley, and Valley Stream Central counselor Ronald Rini. In order to catch up in school, Parker was eager to take on a rigorous course load, Rini explained.

"She's a very bright, resilient person," Rini said. "If she hadn't said a word, you wouldn't know all she's been through."

Wearing a dark, rhinestone-studded jacket to coordinate with Parker's floor-length gown at the prom, Worley chatted with her at a cocktail table overlooking the water. They also captured the moment by posing for photos in front of a spiraling, eggshell white staircase.

"I think she's a really strong person," Worley said. "It's impressive how positive she is after all she's been through. She makes me so proud."

Parker will dorm at Adelphi University in the fall, where she plans to study nursing.

Said Parker, "I'm excited to be even more independent than I already am."

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