International students can face a variety of challenges, just like their American peers: making friends, tough assignments, and peculiar roommates. Renneth Alexis spoke to us about a devastating challenge that hit close to home, in his home country of Dominica, a Caribbean island less than half the size of Baltimore County. He discusses his campus life, experiencing Hurricane Maria through loved ones, and how he hopes the Towson University community will support Dominica.

When did you first come to TU?
I first came in August 2010 as an undergraduate majoring in computer information systems and minoring in business administration. On campus I was a member of the International Student Association (ISA) and Students for the Advancement of Information Technology (SAIT). I graduated in 2013 and completed practical training in Baltimore until 2014. I earned a first graduate degree in Project Management at Morgan State University. Now I'm back at Towson University for another graduate degree in Applied Information Technology, focusing on networking technologies.

Tell us something interesting about Dominica.
It is the nature island of the Caribbean, everyone in the Caribbean knows us for our nature. Everything is nature: mountains, black sand beaches, and the world’s second largest hot spring. It's a small island where everyone knows each other. Even people in the North know people in the South. You can be driving around and all of a sudden you're like “hey so and so!” Everyone is friendly. Everyone works together to help each other out. A lot of the culture is based on being African descendants; we speak Creole after English, even after that, people speak French as we are surrounded by Guadeloupe and Martinique, even villages and foods have French names.

How did you feel when you first saw the hurricane’s path?
We are accustomed to getting hurricanes. It’s a normal thing that happens all the time. First Maria was Category 1, so we thought “Ok, shouldn’t be too bad”, then it went to Category 3 very quickly, then to Category 5 within a few more hours. It escalated from Category 1 to 5 in less than a day. Then we all thought, “Oh my gosh.” We didn't think it was going to be so bad. I was speaking to my parents as it made landfall. They were telling me that the rain and winds were heavy, but they still had electricity. It was just starting to get crazy. I was in a group text with some friends who live near my parents. A few hours later they suddenly stopped replying. Both of them went silent at the same time. That's how I knew the power went out. From that point on we didn’t have contact with anybody until the aftermath.

What is the current situation on Dominica?
Photos of the devastation started emerging thanks to rescue crews from neighboring islands. It looked like a bomb was dropped on Dominica. 95% of houses, including mine, were destroyed. The roof is now being held together by plywood, so if it rains it will not hold for long. The house was flooded. Communication is limited. Only the southern part of the island has cell service now. My mom had to go to a certain part of the island to talk with me.

How have your family and friends been impacted?
My friend from the group chat got in touch with me and said his house was completely destroyed. It just so happens that one of his brothers got really ill, and they had to fly to Antigua for medical attention. The medical facilities in Dominica were destroyed so they had to go out to find help. Fortunately they had the resources to get to Antigua, so he’ll get surgery there. All of my friends either have been injured, had their houses destroyed or have financial problems because the banks are closed.