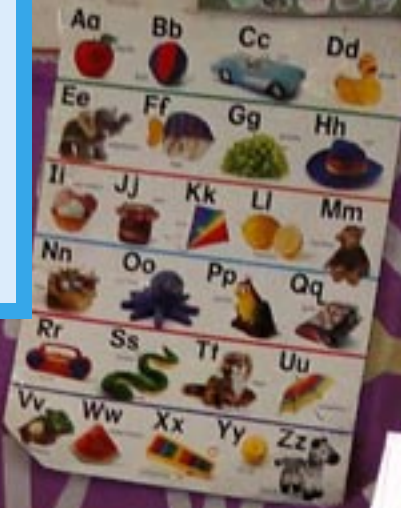


BENEY KELEN
Ejit Elementary
School,
Alumni of the
University of the
South Pacific



BENEY KELEN

Staying focused



Time and time again the letter from the University of the South Pacific arrived, "Congratulations, you are a candidate for the upcoming (fill in the blank) course." And each time Beney Kelen would have a bitter-sweet feeling: Proud that she was an achiever, disconsolate because it meant more work, with many long hours of studying late into the night to come, while she already led such a busy life.

Now studying for her Master's Degree in Education, Beney was born on March 7, 1970 in Majuro, the seventh child in Elias and Stella Jack's family of nine offspring.

At the age of seven, Beney began her long academic career at a Young Men's Christian Association young

EDUCATION

Primary

1977: Young Men's Christian Association program, Marshall Islands

1978-1983: Assumption Elementary School, Marshall Islands

1983-1986: Rita Elementary School, Marshall Islands

Secondary

1986-1990: Marshall Islands High School

1990-1991: Chemeketa Community College, Oregon, United States

1997-1998: USP, Marshall Islands (Pacific Pre-School Teachers Certificate)

1999: USP, Marshall Islands (Certificate in Disability Studies)

2001-2003: USP, Marshall Islands (Diploma in Early Childhood Education)

2003-2010: USP, Marshall (Bachelor of Early Childhood Degree)

2010-?: USP, Master's Degree in Education contender

children's program in Uliga. "After that, I went to Assumption Elementary for grades one to four," she said, adding that this was a scary jump "because at that stage I only spoke Marshallese and the classes were all in English. But I tried my best to learn English ... and we were allowed to speak Marshallese in the playground."

It took her about a year to feel competent in her new language, by which time she was a good student. "I enjoyed going to school and at the end of each year I received awards, especially for math, which was my best subject."

After fourth grade, Beney switched to Rita Elementary School (RES) near her home, "because there wasn't enough money to pay the tuition at Assumption.

"My Dad was a bus driver for the 'special ed' program and my Mom was a cook for RES and MIHS (Marshall Islands High School). He finished high school, but didn't go college, while Mom finished elementary at the Likiep Catholic school, but didn't go on to high school."

With limited education, they wanted more for their children, so they always encouraged Beney to work hard at school. "They said 'You should finish school so you will have a good future; then you'll be able to take care of your children.' So I kept pushing myself to study more."

At RES, the classes were in Marshallese, which Beney liked, even though it was a curious mixture of the languages. "Sometimes it was hard, because the teachers spoke Marshallese, but the textbooks were in English."

At this stage her favorite subjects were math, social studies, and reading and she won awards for all when she graduated from elementary school in 1986. At this stage Beney also met the young man who was to be the cornerstone of her life...

But high school loomed: "I was excited about going on to MIHS, but I was worried because I thought I wouldn't be able to do it, because the work would be too hard. Then, when I got in, I realized I could do it!"

With her good grades, Beney was placed in the 'A' section of her year, which was for the top students. "But my friends were from all the different sections, not just the 'A' kids."

During her four years at high school, Beney's ritual was to go to school, walk home and then "usually help my parents doing chores. Then it would be time for dinner

'I was excited about going on to MIHS, but I was worried because I thought I wouldn't be able to do it, because the work would be too hard. Then, when I got in, I realized I could do it!'

and I'd do my homework after that." As her elder siblings lived with the Jacks' extended family, Beney's father took the role of helping her with her after-school studies.

The portrait of Beney was one of a good girl with many friends and a loving family, but as so often happens, she slipped just slightly during the higher grades of high school. "I had so many friends who wanted me to join them after school. You know, going 'jambo' (cruising) and hanging around. One day I went to a girl-friend's house for a barbecue and didn't get home until midnight and my parents got really mad at me. I was grounded for that for a week," she said, adding, "but I wasn't mad at my parents because I felt guilty that I hadn't told them I would be late."

At school, Beney's teachers were a mixture of Marshallese and some Filipino and American. Asked which nationality she preferred, without a moment's pause she instead said: "Greg Sammer. He was American and taught English. I had him from tenth to the twelfth grades. He taught me new things using a style of teaching different to the Marshallese teachers."

Beney particularly remembered a time when Greg taught her how to write a little story. "It was about teenage pregnancy and was published in the Marshall Islands Journal." In contrast, "the Marshallese teachers taught the same things every day. Americans added more variety so we learned more."

While she enjoyed school, Beney was always happy when summertime came around. "I met Alson (Kelen) when I was in seventh grade and he was in ninth," she said. "He went to the Hawaii Mission Academy School and we met one summer. After he graduated from high school, he came to my home and told my parents that he wanted to take me as his wife in the traditional way. I was 18 at the time and he told my parents that 'if I take her as my wife, I promise you I will make sure Beney finishes her education'."

Her parents agreed and twelfth grade found Beney living with Alson's parents – Lirok and Kelen Joash -- on Ejit Island, the small isle on the northeast corner of Majuro that had been set aside for nuclear refugees from Bikini Atoll. Alson, however, was back in the US studying Psychology at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon.

"It was sad leaving my parents' home," Beney said, "but sometimes I'd spend a week back in Rita." Going to school from Ejit was a novelty for her though: "We had to take a boat over to the other side."

In twelfth grade she enjoyed taking part in a vocational program. "I took the secretarial course and during my second semester I went to work at Cabinet with Amenta Matthew, who was Clerk of Cabinet (and is now Minister of Health). I really enjoyed working with her, filing papers and answering the phone."

Meanwhile, Alson was in the US looking for an apartment for himself and his

wife. "After I graduated from high school, I also applied for Chemeketa and took their secretarial course, but it was so different to high school. It was the biggest challenge," she said forcefully. "There were so many new lecturers, too many different students from different countries and it was difficult learning how to get on with them. I was shy and I was really sad because there were no Marshallese in my classes.

"I would tell myself that I shouldn't cry because it wouldn't help."

But life had something else in store for Beney, that didn't include moping around a US college. "I discovered I was pregnant," she said, "and Alson told me I had to go home to have the baby because he didn't know how to deal with it while he was so busy at college."

Beney returned and in due time gave birth to Alson Kelen Jr. "Alson got back to Majuro when he was eight months old."

Life settled down in the quiet community of Ejit Island and Beney had two more children before her life took another twist. "In 1996, I got a job as the teacher at Head Start on Ejit," she said, adding with a laugh, "I didn't know that Alson had filled in the application form for me."

The principal of the early education program, Ambi Jakeo, contacted Beney by radio and made an appointment to visit the island. "He asked me if I would like to teach kids and, mostly because I already had children, I said okay."

This was the first time Head Start had run a program on Ejit. "We had about 20 kids with two teachers; I was the head teacher and the daughter of our elementary school principal was the teacher's aide."

At first, Beney had no curriculum to teach by ... nor was she a teacher! "I didn't know how to teach. When I later attended USP's early childhood program, I realized that the way I was teaching was completely wrong."

In 1997, Head Start paid for Beney to attend the one year Pacific Pre-School Teacher's Certificate course at USP's Majuro campus. "I wasn't sure I wanted to do it, because I was so busy at home, but Alson pushed me and said it would be good for me. The schedule was three hours a day, three days a week. I would usually take the kids with me and they'd lie under the table or next to me ... it was a bit distracting, but I managed."

About 20 students joined the certificate course, "but only about half of them

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graduated,” Beney said. “The lecturer was really good,” she enthused, “much more professional than my lecturers in Oregon.”

Almost immediately, Beney realized that the way her classroom was set up was completely wrong. “I had chairs and tables in rows and I was the controller. I learned it wasn’t about my controlling the kids and that they couldn’t sit for hours in chairs. Instead, we arranged different learning centers where they could sit on the floor and explore different things.

“Schooling is based on the children, not the teacher! For example now, every morning, we start by standing in a circle and each child gives a morning message such as what they ate for breakfast, what they did last evening, or what they’ve seen on the way to school.”

Soon after graduating in late 1998, Beney received the first of a number of letters stating “Congratulations, you are a candidate for the upcoming Certificate in Disability Studies course” and, again, Head Start was willing to pay for her to raise her teaching skills. “That was a summer course, held during the day at the RMI-USP Joint Education Program.”

Then, in late 2000, another letter arrived: “Congratulations, you are a candidate for the upcoming Diploma in Early Childhood Education course,” a two-year program.

“We were the first students to take a diploma course at USP. In fact, they were still writing the course when we started. A lecturer came up from Fiji for three weeks and then we’d work on our own or with a teacher’s aide until the next lecturer came.

“I was happy to be continuing with school,” she said. “And I didn’t have problems that there wasn’t a full-time lecturer as I find for me it’s better to work on my own.”

Continuing to be a wife, mother, and teacher, Beney ploughed through the course, often working late at night to get her assignments in on time. Little did she realize, however, that the truly tough academic times were still ahead...

“In 2003 I received another letter.” This time it stated: “Congratulations, you are a candidate for the upcoming Bachelor of Early Childhood Degree (BEDECE).” Another inward groan for Beney, but she knew she wanted to do the degree, and “Alson kept supporting me; he’s always saying ‘you can do it.’ I don’t think I would have gone on to the higher levels without him.”

Alson is an achiever in his own right, having been director of Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) for a number of years and, more recently, Mayor of Bikini Atoll.

Beney’s Bachelor’s degree, which she completed with a scholarship from Austra-

lia's AusAID program, didn't come easy. "Oh, sometimes it was such a struggle being a mom, teacher and wife. But I got all the assignments in on time ... well, mostly. You know, the teachers and Irene (Dr. Irene Taafaki, director of the USP Majuro Campus) really helped me. Plus they know that we're busy, so often they'll give us more time to finish something.

"But I remember one night, I was sitting up late typing up an assignment and Alison said: 'Now it's three o'clock and you're still working.' So I told him I had to finish it otherwise they won't accept it, because the deadline will have passed."

During the years of studying for her BEDECE, she never thought she'd give up. "I just said to myself that I'm going to do this, even if it's tough. I will do it!

"I don't know about other people, but I find that if I keep encouraging myself I won't work hard and then I won't succeed in life."

Two years into her degree, the Head Start program closed, in 2005, so she switched to teaching kindergarten at Ejit Elementary. Beney then took another five years to complete the degree, graduating in April, 2010. And then?

Oh, no! Another letter: "Congratulations, you are a candidate for the upcoming Master's degree in Education." Again, funding for the course came from the AusAID program.

So, bravely, Beney is marching ever upwards academically. "I'm hoping to finish the degree in two or three years," she said.

Meanwhile, the Kelen family's one laptop computer is hard at use, with the children wanting their time on the Internet. "It's a bit of a competition to use it," Beney smiled. "My eldest son just gave the salutorian address at the Rita Christian High School graduation, and our daughter Walur, who's 15 and is now at MIHS, graduated from eighth grade as valedictorian.

"All our other kids are doing well too." (Somewhere along the way, Beney had time to have two more children, making five in all.) "I really think that my continuing education has shown them the importance of studying hard."

But then Beney laughed: "There's Garrick who was Hamlet in the play (the Professor Andrew Garrod-produced Shakespeare play Hamlet at MIHS). He's doing really well in math and science, but often he'll say to me, 'How come you're continuing to study. You're too old! What do you need to do it for?'"

Her answer for her son: "This is something I have to do."

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