



TENITA deBRUM
Ennibur
Elementary
School,
Alumni of the
University of the
South Pacific



TENITA deBRUM



Long distance learning

Ujae Atoll is 70 miles from the nearest phone and 2,000 miles from the closest continent. It has just 450 inhabitants who live a simple life of catching fish, harvesting the indigenous plants, and waiting for spasmodic visits by government ships and even more irregular planes.

It is here, on this tiny speck in the Pacific Ocean, that Tenita deBrum spent much of her time working on earning her Bachelor's degree in Education, with a focus on early childhood education. Picture Charles Dickens' writing envi-

EDUCATION

Elementary

1964-65: Ebeye Public Elementary

1965-1974: Ebeye
Christian Elementary

Secondary

1974-1978: Bethania Seminary
(high school), Koror, Palau

1978: Marshall Islands High School

Tertiary

1997-1999: Certificate in Preschool
Education, University of the South
Pacific, Marshall Islands

2000-2005: Diploma in Early
Childhood Education

2006-2010: Bachelor's of
Education in Early Childhood

2010: Master's Degree of
Education contender

ronment without London's smog and chilly weather, and you'd be somewhere close to Tenita's routine of hand-writing her assignments on any available paper she could find.

Unusually for a Marshallese child, Tenita started her academic life at just four, having been born on Ebeye, Kwajalein Atoll, in September, 1960. "I went to what they called 'nursery school' at Ebeye Public Elementary," Tenita said in the library of the University of the South Pacific's (USP) Majuro Campus. She then moved onto Ebeye Christian Elementary School in 1965, where she proved to be a good student.

"I really liked school," she said. "I was a pretty shy kid and hated it when some boys would beat me up, but all through elementary school I did pretty well. In fact I graduated in the honor roll and made the salutorian speech."

No-one had to push Tenita to do her homework. "I'd go home and have some play time ... I was a spoilt kid, I didn't have to do any chores ... and then I'd do my studies. My mother went to nursing school in Guam, so she knew the importance of doing well in school."

The top students at Ebeye Christian were offered places at the missionary school Bethania Seminary (high school) in Ngaraard, a state of the Republic of Palau's northern island of Babeldaob. "My parents decided I should go, and I wasn't too nervous about it because my older sister had attended the school and she still had many friends there."

Up until this point, most of Tenita's schooling had been in Marshallese, with a smattering of English thrown in. "I didn't really know English at that point," she said, "but we had to learn quickly because at Bethania you were only allowed to speak your own language off the campus, which meant only at the beach."

It was 1974 and at first the fourteen-year-old Tenita was homesick, but as there were a lot of other Marshallese at the all-girls school, she soon settled in. "As time goes on and you meet friends, it becomes okay."

The girls slept in a huge, one-room dormitory and shared the communal showers and the 'john' (toilet). "We had to get up early and clean the yard, then a bell would ring and it would be time to read the Bible. After school there'd be another bell for study time, another bell for dinner and then it was lights out.

"The school used generators, which were turned off at 9pm, so you were left with

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only a flashlight to read,” she said. “And then on weekends, if you weren’t studying, we had to go up the mountain to plant tapioca and potatoes. That was a tough school and you weren’t left with much time for yourself!”

Tenita’s favorite subjects were English, typing, and studying the Bible and she continued to be a good student. “I had it in my mind that I wanted to be a secretary,” she said. But twelfth grade found her suddenly being rebellious. “I began chewing betel nut and started talking back to the teachers. Plus, I was really mad at my English (language) teacher, who was having an affair with one of the other teachers. I mean, he was a Christian and they were kind of hiding this relationship they were having.” Angered by his actions, and not believing he was a good teacher anyway, Tenita chose to skip his classes.

“I knew I was being naughty, but I just thought what he was doing was illegal, so I’d go back to the dorm and hide.” Problem was, skipping a class meant earning ten demerit points. “When you reach 100 demerits, you’re expelled,” Tenita explained. “Which I was, with just three months to go before my graduation. I wrote a long letter to my Daddy, apologizing to him for being expelled from school, and asking him for a ticket home.”

Tenita said her father was “okay with this. He said I could finish school at MIHS (Marshall Islands High School on Majuro) as there was no high school on Ebeye at that point.”

At MIHS, Tenita was surprised at how much freedom the students were allowed compared to the Christian Bethania school. “I couldn’t believe how many pregnant girls there were at school.” She was also astonished at the Marshallese teachers, who, unlike their Palauan counterparts, were not particularly professional. “The Paluans were really into their job,” she said, “but often at MIHS we didn’t have a class because the teacher didn’t come.”

While at MIHS, Tenita lived with an uncle whose house was within walking distance from the school, but she didn’t stay long as she discovered she was pregnant and her parents wanted her back in Ebeye, “so that’s where I ended up graduating in 1978.”

Her typing skills did her in good stead on the military base at Kwajalein, Kwajalein. “I first worked for the Global company as a secretary in the generator shop. Each day I’d go across from Ebeye on the ferry. I’d do reports and filing.” Over the next few years, Tenita worked as a secretary for a number of different organizations on Kwajalein, some in a full-time role, some part-time. “Then I worked on Ebeye at the Triple J store, then RRE’s store in accounts receivable. All those jobs were easy for me.”

At this point in Tenita’s story she wanted to explain who she meant when she said ‘father’ or ‘mother.’ “My birth parents are Jekwa and Kurma Korok, but they had an agreement with a couple called Lieobi and Handel Dribo who had only one daugh-

ter. “The Dribos wanted me as their daughter, so my parents said that I would come to them when I was older. In the meantime, they (the Dribos) paid for my education in Palau. He’s a landowner, so he could afford it,” she explained.

“From the time I was about twelve, I lived with them and they really took good care of me. Whenever I asked for something, they’d give it to me and they never spanked me.”

In about 1994, Tenita decided to visit her extended family in Majuro. “It just so happened that I had a letter for someone who worked at Head Start who said to me ‘Hey, we have an opening in Ujae for a Head Start teacher.’ So I filled out the application and eventually got the job, moving from Ebeye in 1996. I lived there through until 2008.”

In 1997, Head Start required that Tenita join other staff members at a course at USP in Majuro. “It was a Preschool Certificate program and it took two years,” she said. Some of this time was spent in Majuro working with the course teachers, the rest on Ujae.

“Of course it was difficult doing work on Ujae, but sometimes I would get help from the WorldTeach teachers.” This is a program out of Harvard University, which sees graduates travel to many corners of the planet to teach in developing countries. It had started sending volunteers to the Marshall Islands early in the decade, and one of Tenita’s favorites was a young American called Peter Rudiak-Gould.

“I’m in his book,” Tenita said excitedly. And, sure enough, in the excellent book *Surviving Paradise: One Year on a Disappearing Island* by Peter, you will find Tenita listed in the acknowledgments under the subtitle: ‘For raising me from cultural infancy.’ Her husband Raymond deBrum, who was the principal of Ujae Elementary, is also listed under the same heading.

“If I had hard questions, I’d ask one of the teachers for their assistance.”

Tenita finished her certificate in 1999 and the next year she signed up at USP for a Diploma in Early Childhood Education, which took her until 2005 to complete.

“When I would come to Majuro for the course, my teacher’s aide would take care of the kids,” she said.

In 2006, Tenita began her Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood degree. “Of course it was difficult being a mom, a teacher and a student, but I did okay.” Finally, though, the struggle became too much and for her education, and other family rea-

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sons, Tenita and her husband moved to Majuro to do the last of her degree courses.

“I finished in December, 2009, and we went back to Ebeye. Then, Ray was asked to become the principal at Ennibur Island on Kwajalein.” This tiny island helps support the Ronald Reagan missile base. “There’s about 150 kids at the school,” she said, adding that life of Ennibur is better than Ebeye, “which is a really small place and very crowded. We’re hoping to go back to Ennibur (after the summer break).”

About four people who earned their Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education were offered the chance of doing a Master’s degree in Education. “There are eight courses and I’m really not sure how long it’s going to take me to finish it. I’ll need to be in Majuro when the lecturers come, but I can do some of the courses online.” To do this while living on Ennibur, Tenita will need to take a short, 10 to 15-minute boat ride to the nearby island of Roi Namur. “The people on Roi help the school with lots of things like books.” But one of the items her husband, the principal, and the rest of the school’s staff is more room. “We have only four classrooms for the 150 kids,” she said, “so we end up using the city hall as a classroom.”

Meanwhile, Tenita’s children are growing up. “My message to my children is ‘education first.’ I tell them that when they finish they’ll have money and they they’ll be ready to take a partner.”

Are there any other messages Tenita would like to send? “Yes, I want to say thank you to the Australians (who paid for her studies). They’re really helpful.”