



ALANSO ELBON
Public Defenders Office
Alumni, University of
the South Pacific



ALANSO W. ELBON

Speaking from the Heart

EDUCATION

Pre-school and kindergarten

1989-1990: Majuro Cooperative School
Elementary

1991-1997: Majuro Cooperative School
High School

1998-2001: Marshall Islands High School
Tertiary

2001: College of the Marshall Islands

2001-2002: University of the South Pacific, Majuro

2003-2006: University of the South Pacific Emalus Campus, Vanuatu (LLB)

2007: Professional Diploma in Legal Practice, University of the South Pacific, Fiji

2008: Pacific Island Law Officers

Network, University of the South Pacific, Vanuatu



Day after day, year after year, a young boy sat in the hushed rooms of Majuro's Court House doing his homework.

Watching the passing parade of people, he saw Marshallese in various states of anxiety as they came to the court to appeal their cases or support others doing the same.

And all the while, Alanso Elbon was very aware of the 'white' people who ran the

Marshall Islands' justice system. "The only Marshallese lawyer I knew of then was Witten Philippo and that didn't seem right to me. I thought: 'How can the people put their cases when they can't speak from their heart using their mother language?'" This was the trigger that sent Alanso on his way to becoming a lawyer.

Born in 1983 in Laura, 25 miles from downtown Majuro, Alanso's father, Walter, worked as a clerk at the Court House.

"We woke up at 6am and left the house at 6:40am to drive downtown," Alanso said in the library of the Public Defender's office. "My father would drop me off at Coop (Majuro Cooperative School) and then afterwards I'd go to the Court and wait for him to finish work. Sometimes I'd go to a friend's house, but mostly I'd go to the Court."

Alanso attended Coop for pre-school in 1989, then moved up to kindergarten and on to the elementary grades. "I was quite outgoing at school," he said. "Well, I was also a bad kid. I was always getting into trouble for fighting, even with the girls. Once I even shoved a girl downstairs," he said with a slightly wicked grin, adding "we're good friends now though!"

He wasn't a particularly studious young chap. "Yeah, they had to force me to do my homework," he said. "But my grades were okay, pretty much average." Math was his biggest problem, "so at one stage I was given extra tutoring to bring me up to speed."

Another hitch in his elementary education was a bad road accident. "I was playing in the street in Rita when I was run over by a car. I was hospitalized and had to go to Hawaii for surgery on my leg twice. Back then – I was about seven or eight -- I was pretty

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sure I wanted to be a pilot, but Mom (Mitha) said I couldn't because of my foot," and with that he pulled off his left shoe and displayed an angry scar on his ankle. The injury had kept him out of school for about six months, a drawback that would have forced many children to repeat a grade, but Alanso was a smart kid and he returned to Coop to breeze through the remaining elementary grades.

In 1997, Alanso graduated from Coop, and moved from the private school's relatively small class sizes to Marshall Islands High School (MIHS). "At Coop we had about 16 kids in the class, but at MIHS the classes were much bigger with about 35 to 40 students."

His screening test for high school merited him a spot in the 'college preparatory' section of his grade. As well, he was given the special chance of attending the Upward Bound (UB) program after school. "School was from 8:30am to 3:30pm and then I'd go to UB from 4pm to 5:30pm. I was very fortunate to go to UB because it's one of those programs that would be sorely missed if it ever closes. The level of education was very high and there'd be just six or seven students to a teacher."

One of the significant elements of UB for Alanso was its counseling classes. "They taught us about peer pressure, alcohol abuse, pre-marital sex and, of course, what college life was like."

Alanso was a straight-A student in high school. "One of the things that helped me was that I am a church-goer," he said. "My church (Jehovah's Witness) helped me to stay focused ... It still does." His focus led him to become the salutarian in his graduating class.

The next education step for Alanso was College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), which was a natural follow-on from the UB program. "They placed me in the developmental level, but I was

completely bored, so I met with a counselor as said ‘hey, can you get me into law school?’” The counselor explained that under the US system, to do law you first had to get a Bachelor of Arts degree.

“Then I remembered that while I was at MIHS, a representative from USP (University of the South Pacific), Mrs. Maselina Sefeti had come to talk to us about their college.” He remembered that USP uses the British system of education, which allows students to go straight into Law after their foundation year and Alonso realized this would be the faster track to achieving his legal dream.

“After just one semester at CMI, I switched to USP. But in between I had a big summer break in Japan.” In 1995, while in sixth grade at Coop, Alonso had been chosen with seven other students to be ‘Junior Ambassadors’ for the Marshall Islands on a trip to Japan.

“In 2002, they invited us back to Japan, this time as ‘Peace Ambassadors’ to the Asia Pacific Children’s Convention. We were there for two to three months, travelling around and having a great time,” he said. “We got to know kids from all over the world. Do you know, until then I didn’t even realize there was a country called the Maldives?”

Back in Majuro, he started attending USP, where he funded himself through a part-time job as a telephone technician for a private company. “Part of the package of being salutorian at MIHS was that I would automatically get an RMI scholarship, but I thought that was only for students going off island.”

Because of his stint at CMI and his trip to Japan, Alonso started

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at USP part way through the academic year. “My friends had already done most of their Preliminary courses, so I was told that instead of the normal seven courses, I only had to do five, but I had to pass them with good scores.” Which he did.

“My Foundation year at USP was a lot more challenging. You see, under the British system it’s like being given an empty book and being told to fill in the answers, whereas under the US system they give you the answers and ask you which are right. There’s true and false tests, multiple choice tests, and you have to write short essays ... Really short essays. I think the British system is much more useful because it exercises your mind more. Plus, I like putting my thoughts down in writing and analyzing problems.”

Alonso also has great praise for his teachers at USP’s Majuro campus. “They were Rotuman, Fijian, Indo-Fijian, and Tongan,” he said, “whereas at CMI the teachers were mostly Marshallese and they were struggling quite a bit with the (English) language,” adding that today “CMI has morphed to become a great tertiary institution.”

At first at USP the Pacific islanders’ accents were hard for Alonso to understand. “But I picked it up pretty quickly. In fact, it got so I’d unconsciously mimic their accents, so much so that one teacher said ‘Are you mocking me, Alonso?’”

During his Foundation year, the teenager was deciding where he would study Law. “I applied for an AusAID scholarship and hoped to go to the University of New South Wales in Sydney. But then I was informed by the (Australian) Embassy in Pohnpei that I couldn’t go to Australia because if there was a similar course available at USP, I had to go there.” And USP did indeed have a Law school at their campus in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

Alonso was pretty mad about that decision as he’d set his heart

on studying in a first world country. “I wanted to get a degree that was recognized internationally and I didn’t think a degree from USP would cover that.”

Fortunately for Alanso, he soon discovered this was incorrect. “In the end I’m so glad I ended going to Vanuatu, mainly because they focused a lot on island law and even specifically on Marshallese law.”

When Alanso first arrived at the Emalus Campus in Port Vila he lived in the dorm. “That lasted about a week before a friend from Chuuk (Federated States of Micronesia) and I moved into a room in a motel with air-conditioning. The motel was just a four- or five-minute walk from the college, all uphill,” he laughed, adding that getting used to hills was one of the biggest things that hit him after leaving the oh-so-flat Marshall Islands.

“I quickly made a lot of friends at the college and within six months I was fluent in Bislama, the local pidgin language that uses English terms with Pacific grammar. The campus itself was really spacious. It was peaceful and calm and the buildings were surrounded by lots of those island statues ... you know the ones?” Tikis? “Yes, tikis.”

While his studies were all new to him, he said he found the work relatively easy. “My main problem was that I was typically Marshallese and would wait until the last minute to do my assignments.”

His first year “was a cruise. But my second year was like a climb

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up a long steep hill. Third year was another good-sized slope but the fourth year it was a plateau and I was back to cruising.”

Unlike many of his peers, Alanso made good use of his summer breaks from college, which saw him return to Majuro. “I planned each of the summers to fit in with my degree,” he explained. “I would email the relevant people and ask if I could work with them.”

The first summer break he interned at the Attorney General’s office and the second at the Nitijela’s Legislative Council (“that’s where they draft the laws”). “I spent my third summer break working at the High Court with Chief justice Carl Ingram and Associate Justice Richard Hickson. I liked that one the best, plus they had the highest pay at \$7 or \$8 an hour.”

In 2006, Alanso finally graduated from USP with his Law Degree (LLB). “We had a pretty good party that night,” he laughed. “I staggered up the next morning and was terrified I’d lost my degree ... everyone made fun of me over that, telling me it was okay because they’d only given me a fake one!” Armed with his new legal status, Alanso returned to Majuro with high hopes of getting a suitable job straight away. No such luck. “There were no jobs available, so I ended up teaching Upward Bound counseling out at Laura. Actually, I did enjoy that, but I was pretty pissed off with the AG’s office for not giving me a job.”

When the USP semester ended, Alanso was at a loose end, so in 2007 he decided to do further study in the form of the Professional Diploma in Legal Practice (PDLP) at USP’s Suva, Fiji, campus. “The course improved my advocacy skills,” he said.

The next time he returned to Majuro, in November, his lucky star was shining. “I knew there was an opening at the Public Defender’s office, so I spoke to one of the defenders Russell (Kun) and through PSC (Public Service Commission), I got the job. But

although I had the job and the LLB and PDLP I was told by the Courts that I should sit the bar exams, so I did and I passed.

“My job now is to defend the innocents until they are proven guilty.” In just two years, he has defended more than a 100 cases. “They range from misdemeanors up to first degree murder and rape. I’m also the Public Defender for Ebeye and travel there every three months or so to handle cases up there.”

He works for the legal system proud to be a Marshallese and be able to have his clients speak in court from “the heart in their mother language.”

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
Majuro, Marshall Islands, September, 2009*