



CHINILLA PEDRO
Ministry of Health
Alumni of the University
of the South Pacific



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Getting through the tough times



EDUCATION

Pre-School

1987-1988: Majuro Headstart Program

Elementary

1988-1989: Delap Elementary School

1989-1990: Rairok Elementary School

1990-1995: Majuro Cooperative School

Secondary

1995-1996: Majuro Middle School

1996-2000: Marshall Islands High School

Tertiary

2000-2001: University of the South Pacific Joint Program, Marshall Islands

2002-2005: University of the South Pacific, Fiji. BA

2006-2008: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands, Geographic Information Systems

The thought of handling a dead rat and taking a scalpel to its small and scary body, made Chinilla Tafaoata Pedro rethink her education focus. She'd been so determined to follow the Sciences in college, "but the thought of doing that to a rat just completely put me off," she said in her Ministry of Health office.

"We were supposed to dissect a frog in the course, but we don't have them in the Marshalls, so it had to be a rat," and with that she shuddered and then burst out laughing, realizing how small a deal this probably was compared to the shaping of her future.

Chinilla was born in 1982 and at age five attended the Majuro Headstart Program. "That's where I started to learn my ABCs, even though part of the program was like being baby-sat." Her next academic step was to attend Delap Elementary School (DES), where lessons were all in Marshallese. "Then Rairok Elementary opened in

1989, so my parents switched me to there,” she said, adding that it too also held all classes in Marshallese. “We all spoke Marshallese at home; even my Dad, Fred, who is from Tuvalu, so at that point I had no English.”

This concentration on one language was a huge handicap for the little girl when her parents decided again to move her to a different school, this time Majuro Cooperative School (Coop), where English was the order of the day. “I know my parents wanted me to have a better education, but at first I was kind of scared. I mean the kids didn’t even speak Marshallese in the playground and the teachers were mostly American.” Her lack of English skills led her to repeating second grade “and that first year was really difficult for me.”

Realizing the problem, her mother, who worked at the Bank of Guam and was multi-lingual, helped her daughter improve her English skills. “She started speaking more English at home and we’d read one chapter of a book every day. And, it’s funny, because later my favorite subject was spelling!”

Chinilla now believes that all Marshallese schools should have a balance of Marshallese and English. “I guess I struggled for two years, but then by fourth grade I was doing okay.”

After Coop, the youngest Pedro daughter signed up for Majuro Middle School in 1995. “I sat a test and ended up jumping a year, into eighth grade. I guess the good schooling I had at Coop paid off and I did well in my scores that year.”

This feat was made more difficult because at that time Middle School students attended school for half a day because of a lack of space. “I went in the afternoons only, from 1pm to 5pm. In the mornings I’d help out at a little family store we had near the school.”

At this stage of her education, Chinilla was doing well in her studies and was chosen for the college ‘prep’ section when she began attending Marshall Islands High School (MIHS). This meant that she would also attend Upward Bound, an elite program for high scoring students that helps prepare them for college. “UB was great. It really helped me with my studies at school. Plus there were only 10 to 14 kids in my class, compared to 30 or 40 at MIHS.”

Upward Bound, which was then based at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) was a privilege Chinilla was thrilled to have. “We got a stipend of \$10 a week, which was mostly for transport. Plus, my friends and I would spend lots of time at the CMI library, pretending we were college students.”

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In high school, Chinilla said her grades were “mostly good. But in tenth and eleventh grades I started to goof off. I got a lot of ‘C’s, whereas I was used to getting ‘A’s. My parents weren’t happy about that and they’d give me time out and ground me, which meant no movies, no ‘jambo’ (cruising around town in cars), no things that teens like to do.”

By the end of eleventh grade, Chinilla knew she’d have to smarten up her act, so she made more of an effort in class and with her homework. “I could see my friends doing much better than me, so I became much more competitive and worked harder,” she said.

“I focused more in class and asked more questions, which was quite difficult as I was shy.” She also had a secret weapon in the shape of her best buddy, Ribbecca Domingo, “who is really smart. She would help me with my work, particularly physics and math. She could explain the work to me much better than the teachers, using a mix of English and Marshallese ... and ‘teen talk.’”

Nearing graduation from high school, Chinilla figured she would attend CMI, particularly as this is a natural extension of attending Upward Bound. “But then, during the first semester of our 12th grade, the principal for RMI-USP Joint Program (University of the South Pacific), the late Masilina Sefeti came to speak to all the seniors. She really caught my attention when she spoke about the different education systems and explained that in the American system school teachers bring themselves down to the student’s level, whereas at USP (which follows the British system), they don’t do that. Instead they pull us up to our grade level.”

That sounded like a real challenge for Chinilla, so half way through her graduating year, she joined some of her peers to study her final months of high school at RMI’s USP Preparatory program. “That made a lot of difference to me,” she said. “There was much more reading; it was very intense. I realized I had a lot to catch up on.” She wasn’t alone in this, and all her school friends who attended USP had to work hard to make the grade. “The teachers at USP helped us a lot with out school work realizing that the dose of work was too much for us but said that was our grade level work, so we had to struggle through.

Passing her exams and graduating with the MIHS Class of 2000 made Chinilla decide to continue with USP’s Foundation year in 2001. “I’d chosen to do Science in my Preliminary, but I found it really difficult. I was only a month into it when one day I saw in the class schedule that we were going to have to dissect a rat. It was two weeks away and I knew I just couldn’t do it. So I switched to Social Sciences, focusing on History and Politics, Geography and Sociology.”

These subjects were all new to her: “I loved learning about the other Pacific countries,” she said.

At this time, Chinilla’s elder brother was attending the University of Waikato in New Zealand. “After finishing Foundation year, we could then apply for any college, and I was hoping to go to Waikato.” To that end, she filled in the New Zealand Schol-

arship application forms, but she – and her USP teachers – did not realize that she also needed to send a letter to the school. “If I’d written personally to Waikato I probably would have got in. They changed that at USP the next year, and now they send the proper letters.”

With Waikato out of the question, Chinilla chose to attend USP’s Laucala campus in Fiji on an RMI scholarship. “I thought I would do that for a semester and then re-apply to go to New Zealand.” At that, she laughed and added, “but that first semester was a total culture shock. Me and my Marshallese friends stuck together and we struggled to fit in on the campus.” This was a difficult period of Chinilla’s life, as her mother had recently died. “My Dad pushed me to stick with USP, telling me how important education is. At times when it was really hard I could hear my dad’s voice telling me, ‘when the going gets tough, the tough gets going.’ So I kept going.

For her first semester at USP, in 2002, Chinilla lived in the campus dormitory. “Then some friends and I got a flat, which made it a bit cheaper to live. I think we got \$2,500 from the scholarship board for a semester. That wasn’t enough money to live on, but in the flat we shared the expenses, which made it a little better.”

But school wasn’t going well. “I was skipping classes and never went to tutorials. I failed that semester and really felt like I was letting myself down and my family back home. I knew I had to change, so I isolated myself from all the wild Marshallese parties and forced myself into the library and the computer labs. I felt I was missing out but I knew I was doing the right thing — for the long run.

The Laucala campus has what are fondly called the ‘white tables’ and this is where Chinilla could be found when not in class, discussing and debating issues relating to her studies with her peers from all around the Pacific. “I had chosen to do a double major of a BA in Management and Public Administration and History and Politics. Everyone thought that was a pretty weird choice, but I enjoyed it.”

Like all the off-islanders at USP in Fiji, Chinilla came home each summer. “The first year I got a job at the Outrigger (now Marshall Islands Resort) as a desk clerk. The other times I worked at V7Emon as a radio announcer.” The station is owned by her father, Fred. “This was definitely a ‘pro bono’ job,” she laughed, explaining that she wasn’t paid for her time on air. “But it was fun, especially because I slowly broke the Ice on public speaking and of course I got to play my favorite tunes.”

Back in Fiji, romance was in the air, and Chinilla partnered up with Henry Johnny

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Peter, who is also a USP alumni. "He was also doing management, and he became my best friend and my best study mate. Then it was really sad, because he was a year ahead of me and had to come home to Majuro.

"Well, maybe that made me work even harder, so that I could come back and be with him." She did indeed study a lot and, in late 2005, she graduated with her degree.

Chinilla had hoped on her return to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The Secretary had called me and suggested that I apply for a job," she said. "But I didn't get it.

"Then I thought it would be great to work at WUTMI (Women United Together in the Marshall Islands), but they had no funding to give me a job."

Instead the then administrator of Majuro Hospital, Sandy Alfred, who heard of Chinilla through her boyfriend, offered her a job. "Sandy had come down to Fiji in my second year at USP to recruit people," she said. "I wasn't sure about it, because I didn't really want to work at the same place as Henry, but in the end I realized I didn't have a choice."

Her first job at the hospital was in the newly-formed position of Director for Patient Services. "Sandy wanted there to be more coordination between the doctors and nurses and the patients." He was also keen on improving the hospital and the Ministry's grasp of the community's health problems and asked Chinilla to do USP's Geographic Information Systems (GIS) course at its Majuro campus, which would help her and a team to 'map' and pin down health statistics.

In 2006, Chinilla was made Associate Administrator for Support Services under Sandy's Administration. "That covers medical records, the morgue, housekeeping, biomedical services and the kitchen." Sadly, though, for Chinilla, Sandy left the hospital for a job in the private sector.. "I did do the GIS course, though, and it was very interesting."

"Then, in 2008, the Secretary for Health (Justina Langidrik) did some reorganizing and I was moved over to the Grants Management Office as Deputy Director. As an example of what we're doing, I've recently been working with someone from UH (University of Hilo) who helped us write a grant for \$150,000 for 'universal newborn hearing screening' ... it's an early hearing detection and intervention program."

And are Chinilla's studies over? "Hmm," she said. "I'd like to see myself working for a regional office, say in Fiji. Maybe I'll do my master's degree, because there's a greater range of jobs open to you if you have an MBA."

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
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