

A full-body photograph of a man standing outdoors in front of a large palm tree. The man is smiling and wearing a short-sleeved, button-down shirt with a green and black geometric pattern. He is also wearing dark trousers and a silver watch on his left wrist. The background shows the trunk and fronds of a palm tree.

DAVID TIBON
Laura High
School
Alumni of the
University
of the South
Pacific



DAVID TIBON

Waking up to Working Hard

EDUCATION

Elementary

1986-1988: Majuro Cooperative School, Marshall Islands

1988-89: Assumption Elementary School, Marshall Islands

1989-1994: Laura Elementary School, Marshall Islands

Secondary

1994-1998: Marshall Islands High School

Tertiary

1999-2000: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands

2001-2003: Fiji College of Advanced Education (Diploma of Education)

2006-?: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands (Bachelor of Education contender)



There are many excellent reasons why high school students should choose the University of the South Pacific (USP) for their tertiary education, but David Tibon's rationale is surely unique: "The RMI USP Principal Maselina Sefeti came to speak to the seniors about the courses they offered, and that was interesting, but mostly I felt that if I attended USP, my mom (Lydia, the secretary at the USP Majuro campus), would be there so it would be easier for me to get money for lunch and get a ride back home each day!"

A few moments later, he stopped mid-sentence and added: "I forgot to tell you the other main reason I wanted to go to USP ... My girlfriend was going there too."

Hardly the stuff from which grand, future-shaping decisions are born, but for 28-year-old David it made perfect sense, so the lad donned the royal blue and yellow uniform in the second semester of his graduation year at Marshall Islands High

School (MIHS) and started attending the RMI USP program.

Born in 1981, David grew up in Rita and attended Majuro Cooperative School for kindergarten and first grade, then moved to Assumption Elementary for second grade. The primary language at both institutions was English, but this wasn't a concern for the lad as his home was bilingual. "My dad (Jorelik), now Deputy Chief Secretary, graduated from college. So did my mom ... she went to college in Chicago."

In 1989, the Tibon family moved from one end of Majuro Atoll to the other, so David switched schools again, this time to Laura Elementary School. "Because I was late for registration and third grade was already full, they decided to let me skip third grade and go straight into fourth," he said, sitting in the shade of RRE Hotel's barbecue tables with the brilliant blue lagoon as a backdrop. "But school was really boring. The school level was way too low as compared to the two previous schools I had attended and it was all in Marshallese, at least until we got an American teacher in eighth grade.

"It seemed that at Coop and Assumption the teachers really cared about the students, but at Laura the students didn't know the importance of education as our teachers didn't care much. There was this one guy who would hand out pieces of paper and tell us to do some drawing while he sat back and enjoyed his coffee while reading his newspaper."

This startling education strategy made David decide while in elementary school to become a teacher, figuring he could certainly improve on that particular teacher's style. He also thought that he would contribute to his nation as RMI needs qualified teachers.

An average pupil, in 1984, David graduated from elementary school and, with his many friends, began the commute to MIHS as Laura High School was not to open until 2001. "I'd get up at five or five-thirty and get ready to get the bus into town.

"Most of the time my parents gave me money and I'd buy a bag of Ramen for breakfast, which was the logical choice at that time for price and time consumption."

High school held a few depressing similarities to his earlier education, as when asked what his favorite subject was in his freshman year, David immediately said English. That's because the teacher seemed to like me and if me and my friends bought him a cup of coffee and maybe a bag of donuts, he'd let us skip class."

When pressed, he said that English wasn't his favorite subject at all: "I liked the vocational subjects more, such as woodwork and mechanics because I wasn't work-

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ing hard enough and was at the bottom of the class. I never took computer classes or stuff like that, because they'd put the kids who weren't doing academically well into the vocational classes."

Hanging out with his friends and playing basketball were much more important to young David than studying and the question "Were you popular?" brought a roll of the eyes that was easily defined as "Duh!"

Not surprisingly, David's parents were not impressed with his low grades. "If I brought home a bad report card, they'd ground me, which basically meant I wasn't allowed to play basketball for a week. Boy, one week was too long and it just made me angry. Looking back, as a teenager, it was quite hard for my parents to deal with me. At times, they thought grounding me was the best strategy to use. But for me, it was like a hungry dog eager to get out from its cage. Anyway, I have no regrets for what my parents did to me."

Another factor that didn't help his studies was that David didn't spend a lot of time at home. "I'd get home from school, drop my books, and then go out until ten or eleven."

David is now the Vice Principal of Laura High School, so when, exactly, did he realize that hard work may be a good idea? "The change started in eleventh grade when I took part in a Close Up program, which was a series of workshops held at the Niti-jela (parliament) to learn about how the RMI government worked. It was from this time that I started to see the picture of the importance of education."

A number of schools participated in the Close Up workshops, with each being required to give a presentation. "I think our topic was waste (trash) and it wasn't good. It was the third day and our leader wanted each one of us to take part and when I got up to read my bit I realized I didn't know what I was talking about ... At all. Coming down from the center stage, I overheard some people in the audience saying 'He is nothing like his father.' I went home and felt really bad.

"From that day onwards I decided to change. I read something every day: Newspapers or anything. You know, my dad and my sisters would read all the time, but reading made me fall asleep." Admittedly, the high school had limited resources. "There wasn't enough reading material and while I know there were counselors, I know I never spoke to one."

Around the time of the Close Up workshop, the principal of USP came to talk to the students, explaining the options offered by the higher education institution. "Of course, my mom had already told me what was going on at USP, so she was hoping I would sign up," he said.

"The first week at USP (for the Preparatory year) was a shock. The level of studies, the amount of work we had to do was amazing. I quickly realized that I was so behind, especially in my English skills. I thought of quitting many times, but fortunately I had some friends that helped me with my studies.

“That year, there were fewer times for playing basketball. Instead, I’d get home, change my clothes and eat and then four of us guys would meet someplace, maybe at one of their houses or my house, and we’d take turns discussing stuff. We’d prepare for it, such as get help on a chapter from a teacher, and then when it was my turn, I’d lead the discussion. We went in rotation, except for when the subject was math, which I wasn’t good at, and then I’d just listen.”

The four students would meet at least three or four nights a week for two hours to hold their joint study sessions. Meanwhile, out on the playing field, David’s former friends were sniffing their noses at him. “They totally ignored me ... when they weren’t calling me Nerd! But I knew I was doing the right thing, especially as I still had my mind set on going to college and becoming a teacher.”

David graduated from MIHS in 1998 and then struggled through the remainder of the USP Preparatory year (the Marshallese academic year runs from August to May, while USP follows the British school calendar of February to December).

Next up was USP’s Foundation year. “By then I thought I was on the right pace, but still that year was much harder. There were more assignments, the length of each assignment was longer, and there was more standing up in front of the class to make presentations.” Here David interrupted his train of thought to stress that preparation is the key to standing up in front of the class. “Not being prepared makes us nervous.”

The workload during Foundation year led him to move to an auntie’s house in Rita. “I needed more time to go to the library in the evenings,” he said. “It would be open from seven to nine, Monday to Friday with teachers there to help us.”

With pride, he made it through Foundation and successfully applied for the Fiji College of Advanced Education, a government institution.

“I was very excited about going to Fiji ... I’d never left the Marshall Islands before,” he said. But on arrival he was dreadfully homesick: “It was so much bigger and there were so many new things to adjust to.” But after two or three weeks, David was in the swing of things and enjoying new experiences, such as going to the movies (“Back then Majuro didn’t have a cinema”).

Paying for his studies and living on an RMI scholarship, David lived in the dorm at the Suva campus for the two years of the course. “The scholarship money was not

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good, so my parents helped too by sending me money every now and then.”

The workload at the college was another steep step up the education mountain. “Things were harder, especially as there were more presentations.” He was also the only Marshallese at the school, although he said this was a good thing. “There were lots of Marshallese over at the USP campus, but I knew I had to avoid them as much as possible if I was going to work hard. The fact that everyone else was working hard helped.”

His second year at the teachers college required him to teach for three months in Fijian classrooms. “I’d chosen to teach high school level as I didn’t want to deal with the younger kids ... I didn’t want to be a babysitter.”

One surprise in the Fijian schools was the students’ attitude, both to their school work and to their teachers. “They were much more well-behaved (than Marshallese students). When the teacher comes into the class, all the students immediately stand up and they call your ‘Sir’ or ‘Master’.”

David graduated from college in 2003 and immediately landed a job teaching at Laura High School. “I taught Pacific Studies and Marshallese Language Art.” Over the next few years he landed more responsibilities as an advisory teacher. “At that time we didn’t really have a curriculum, so you just sort of winged it,” he said, “adding that this has just been revised.”

There was a hitch attached to his new job, however. “Because I only had a diploma, they weren’t paying me what I felt I should be getting.”

This resulted in him quitting from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and moving to the RMI Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) as a conservation officer in August, 2007. In the meantime, however, he wasn’t abandoning his original goals. “In 2006, I began studying for my Bachelor of Education at USP’s Majuro campus.”

“The workload was way easier at EPA. My main project was helping to establish a conservation site out at Woja, near Laura.” These sites are called Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and are designed to make fishing a sustainable, viable option for communities.

David spent just one year at EPA as in 2008 a teacher left Laura High, leaving a slot open at the right salary range. “I became an advisor teacher again and was chairperson for the Social Studies Department.”

Fast forward a year, and David successfully applied for the position of Vice Principal. “One of my main roles is to monitor attendance at the school, although I do teach a couple of subjects. At the beginning of the school year, attendance was very bad, because no-one was monitoring it. Now the figures are better, even though we have had to expel six students.”

Holding down a full-time job in Laura and doing his degree makes for a tough schedule. “After school, I get the bus into town and do classes from five to seven in

the evening. I hope to finish my degree in 2010. Perhaps I'll take the fast track and finish it down in Suva."

Goodness! Whatever happened to the mantra: "Hey, mom, lend me a couple of bucks"? David, it seems, has well and truly grown up.