



DEBORAH BARKER-MANASE
OEPPC
Alumni, University of
the South Pacific



DEBORAH BARKER-MANASE

The Power of Pacific Islanders



When Deborah Barker-Manase made the switch from the College of the Marshall Islands to the University of the South Pacific Foundation, her eyes were suddenly opened to the power of Pacific Islanders.

“My only focus until then was on here (the Marshall Islands) and the US,” said the now Deputy Director of the Office of Environmental Planning and Policy Coordination (OEPPC).

“Then, at USP, I discovered Pacific island politics. I learned a lot

EDUCATION

Elementary:

1982-1990: Majuro Cooperative School, Marshall Islands

Secondary:

1991-1993:

Strongsville High School, Ohio, United States

1993-1994: Marshall Islands High School

Tertiary:

1995-1996:

University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands (Foundation Program)

1996-1999:

University of Waikato, New Zealand

about the other islands and discovered that a lot of publications used in the course were written by islanders. This was a real eye-opener for me.”

The daughter of American Troy Barker and Marshallese Elbe Lokboj Barker, Deborah grew up being taught that education was important, but during the first chapter of her schooling at Majuro Cooperative School, she claims, laughing, that “I was not a good student. I remember Coop as a time of having a lot of fun and building many friendships that I still have today.”

Good student or not, she had one advantage over many Marshallese students during these formative years that would help her in the years to come. “We spoke a mixture of Marshallese and English at home, and Coop had mostly American teachers,” she said.

This English language skill stood her in good stead when her parents and she decided her education would be greatly assisted by her studying in America.

“My parents were constantly telling me how important education was,” Deborah said.

“My Mom had studied overseas at Palau and then Rhode Island, US, so she was very supportive of my schooling.”

Her father, Troy’s, dedication to education was even more specific. “He came to the Marshall Islands with the Peace Corps in the 1960s, teaching at Marshall Islands High School (MIHS).”

So, at the age of 15, it was decided Deborah would transfer to a high school in Strongsville, near Cleveland Ohio, where her father’s sister lived. “In Strongsville I blossomed a bit more ‘education-

**‘My parents
were constantly
telling me how
important
education was.’**

wise’,” she said. “I realized I was in a different setting. It (the schooling) was stricter, the classroom setting more formal.”

Gaining good grades at Strongsville High, the family decided it would be best for Deborah to take her last year of high school in Majuro. “We felt this would give me a better chance at getting an RMI scholarship,” she said, a prophetic decision as it turned out.

Deborah graduated with honors from MIHS in 1994. “Then I went to CMI for one semester. But then heard about the opening of the new USP center and decided to enroll.

Deborah was suddenly in an academic environment that required a full day of schooling and “at least three or four hours of homework in the evening.” It was the school’s first year and there “was just a handful of us ... maybe six students.

“We had a Tongan teacher (who was the Director at the time) teaching Pacific Island Politics and it was an eye-opener in that I had a sense that islanders ‘can do it too’. It made me feel that we can still be proud of our culture without the need to choose one (American) over the other.”

Sitting in the small OEPPC conference room, Deborah took a moment to reflect on her Marshallese language skills. “I wish now that we had done more formal Marshallese language studies at Coop. I knew a Samoan student who did Samoan language at school and even though she spoke it well, she said studying the language was really hard.”

The USP center was distinctly multi-cultural with Tongan, Fijian, and Marshallese teachers. “One was Jefferson Barton (now RMI’s Secretary of the Ministry of Finance) who volunteered as an economics tutor.” During her year at USP doing Social Sciences, “I was studying really hard,” and her thoughts were on where she should continue her studies.

“A friend of mine, Jennifer Levy-Strauss, had been to high school in New Zealand and had brought home books from Otago and Waikato universities for me and my friends to look at.” A number chose Otago, “But I chose Waikato, which is further north, because it’s warmer,” she laughed.

Having achieved her dream of an RMI scholarship, she chose to study Bachelor of Management Studies in the Environment and Management Program. “I had the general feeling that I wanted to work with something in the environment,” Deborah said. “I once saw some EPA (Environmental Protection Authority) staff collecting water samples and it looked really interesting. That may well have been the trigger.”

Was the transition to a new country difficult? “Before going to Waikato I was nervous socially,” she said, “especially as I was going to be the only Marshallese there.” But moving into a ‘dorm’ helped.

“That was useful for studying and also for socializing,” Deborah said. “There were a lot of dorm activities and, of course, at the beginning there was orientation week and all its events, which slides you in there more easily.”

While Deborah is grateful for the RMI scholarship, she still had a financial challenge. “The scholarship covered tuition and books, but it fell short when it came to dorm fees. So I moved out and flatted with an Indo-Fijian girl, and that was cheaper. Plus my parents were helping to support me.”

Luckily for Deborah, one of the Waikato counselors could see she was struggling financially. “Without me knowing, she organized for

‘I liked New Zealand. The mix of cultures made it easy for a Pacific islander to fit in.’

me to switch to a New Zealand Overseas Development Aid Scholarship for the remaining three years. That was a life-saver.”

The RMI scholarship was paid in a lump sum. “That was tricky to budget,” Deborah said. In comparison, the New Zealand scholarship paid for tuition and books and the living allowance was given out every two weeks.

“This meant I had a bit of spare money so I could go to the movies occasionally and go to town to maybe buy one special thing.”

Her remaining three years at Waikato were enjoyable ones. “I liked New Zealand. The mix of cultures made it easy for a Pacific islander to fit in.” And then graduation crept up on her, and her father arrived to help her celebrate her success. By then a number of Marshallese were attending Waikato University. “Yolanda Lodge, Sultan Korean, Keyoka Kabua, and Kino Kabua were all there,” she said. And they were all considering what they would do when they finished their degrees.

“We talked together a lot about why they didn’t have intern positions in the RMI. It would have been great if we could have had the opportunity to maybe come back to Majuro for a summer internship. And then have, say, a six months internship when we graduated.”

This suggestion was raised in a collective letter asking the RMI scholarship office to set up internships, but to no avail. “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and OEPPC do have internships now, but they were more or less developed as ‘one-offs’.”

Fast forward to Deborah’s flight back to Majuro and even before stepping out of the Amata Kabua International Airport terminal, she had a lucky break. “I saw the then general manager of EPA, Jorelik Tibon, and he was asking me what courses I’d taken,” she said. “And then he invited me to come along and meet with him. I

made an appointment and got a job assisting in the earth-moving department.

“I enjoyed work. It was another learning experience for me.” But all was not perfect, “I had concerns with how files were kept. That we weren’t responding well enough to requests from outer islands on water quality testing.” After a year working in the earth moving department, Deborah was given the task of heading up the new Biodiversity Conservation Unit, and coordinating one of the United Nations Projects being implemented by EPA at the time.

Working on the project provided useful experience in project management. In 2003, changes in the environment sector occurred and she again found herself in an interesting and challenging role: “They set up OEPPC and I was invited on the team.” The government had felt that EPA was busy enough with domestic environmental concerns, and that it needed an environmental office that would focus on the global picture.

Deborah is currently a particularly busy lady in her job, which includes travelling for two to three months a year to attend various environmental conferences. “Significantly, the Kyoto Protocol runs out in 2012,” she said. “And right now we have three major projects on our plate: climate change, sustainable land management, and renewable energy projects.

“We have coordinators for each and I assist them in a supervisory role. It’s a busy time for us.”

Very busy for Deborah, who is obviously passionate about her work as she juggles work with a full home life with husband Talafou Manase and her two boys Kankom, four, and Tusitala, two. “Yeah, it’s busy, but fun,” she said with a big smile.

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