



DUSTIN BANTOL
Majuro Hospital Dental
Department



DUSTIN BANTOL

Long, winding road

Star written by Bryan Adams,
Robert John "Mutt" Lange and
Michael Kamen in 1995

*There's a road long and winding
The lights are blinding - but it gets there
Don't look back - don't give up*

*There's a silver lining - it's out there somewhere
Everybody wants an answer
- everybody needs a friend
We all need a shining star on which we can depend*

*So tonight we're gonna wish upon a star
We never wished upon before
- (gotta find what you're looking for)*

*There'll be times - in your life
Ya when you're dancing n' shit
- but you ain't getting it
But don't get disillusioned - no, don't expect too much*

*Cuz if what you have is all you can get
Just keep on trying - it just ain't happened yet
Everybody wants to be a winner
- everybody has a dream
We all need a shining star when things ain't what they seem*

*N' so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star
We never wished upon before
- (gotta get where your heading for)*

*Everybody wants some kind of peace
- everybody needs a break
We all need a shining star when things get hard to take
N' so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star
We never wished upon before*



EDUCATION

Elementary

1988-1995: Queen of Peace Elementary School, Ebeye, Marshall Islands

Secondary

1995-1999: Xavier High School, Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia

Tertiary

1999-2000: RMI-USP Joint Education Program, Majuro, Marshall Islands

2001-2006: Fiji School of Medicine, Suva, Fiji. Bachelor of Dental Surgery.

"I'll never forget the song they played at our high school graduation," Dustin Bantol said, clearing his throat and then softly singing the words ... "There's a road long and winding ... the lights are blinding..." He stopped and added, "It has a chorus, which goes ... well, I can't quite remember it now, but it was good."

That chorus is: "What cha wanna be - when you grow up?; What cha gonna do - when your time is up?; What cha gonna say - when things go wrong?; What cha wanna do - when you're on your own?"

On that day in 1999 at Xavier High School in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, as Dustin was wearing the schools' red robes and mortar boards, he took hold of the message in Bryan Adams' *Star* and ran with "What cha gonna be" all the way to the dentistry department of Majuro Hospital.

Dustin was born on Ebeye Island, Kwajalein Atoll, in 1981. "I went to Queen of Peace Elementary for first through eighth grade," the son of Aeto and Maggie Bantol said. "My Dad worked for Kwajalein Atoll Local Government and my Mom worked at the post office.

"They both wanted us (himself and his two sisters and three brothers) to get good grades. They emphasized the importance of doing our assignments. If we had an assignment to do, we couldn't go out to play after school until we'd got it done. It was also a big thing if we didn't make the honor list."

Dustin, in fact, made the honor list for "pretty much all the years I was at school in Ebeye. I remember each assembly at the end of the year and I'd get awards for all the subjects."

Surprisingly, Dustin wasn't a fan of reading books, despite his good grades. "I didn't start reading books until I got into high school. I was more into sport, especially baseball and basketball."

Dustin did so well at elementary school, his parents and the principal and staff of Queen of Peace decided he should go on to Xavier, the well-respected Jesuit high school in Chuuk. "I had mixed emotions about going to a new place. It was to be the first time I'd been on my own. But Xavier is very good at looking after new students, plus another student from my grade, Paulina Capelle, was coming with me to Xavier as well as four students from Majuro."

At first, Dustin stuck by the other Marshallese students. "But the school tries hard to get all the students to mingle, so in the end you stick with the people in your class. It wasn't about nationality."

The biggest change for Dustin at Xavier was having to look after himself. "You aren't 'spoon fed'," he said. "We had to wash our own clothes and things like that. The dorms were in two big buildings where there were lots of beds and lots of lockers."

The Xavier staff kept the students busy, both academically and after school. "We were all assigned certain obligations. For example, on Monday it would be my turn to feed the pigs, Tuesday to look after the compost pile, Thursday to clean the class room or the chapel. There was no time to get bored!"

There was however time to take a few bad turns on the 'long and winding road.' "I got into trouble in ninth grade. Me and a couple of boys of other nationalities went

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out drinking with some senior boys. One of the seniors got caught and told on the others, but my friend and I were lucky, because the seniors realized we were young, so they protected us.

“Then, in tenth grade, Henry Peter (a fellow Marshallese) and I were put on suspension. We’d won a baseball game and we went wild and broke up a shed. We were put on punishment for a week and weren’t allowed to go to school. We weren’t allowed to talk to the other students and they weren’t allowed to talk to us or we would be expelled and they’d be put on suspension.”

Dustin and Henry spent that week eating separately from everyone else and spending all day, every day, cutting the grass. With a groan, he said: “It was for the whole week. With only a machete! Our hands were covered in blisters, but worse I was very afraid. I didn’t want to be expelled.”

He knew, however, that his parents had been told of his punishment. “So after that I was much more careful about how I acted and what I did.” He didn’t stop drinking – vodka was the drink of choice – but he was more careful about the when and the where.

The former honor student was by now only getting okay grades and would often end up on the school’s ‘black list.’ “They put the list up every Friday. It showed all the undisciplined things the students had done that week. I was a regular on the list.

“Not that they were always serious crimes. For example, in the dining room you should be a decent person and always wear a shirt. If you didn’t wear a shirt, they’d fine you.” The ‘fine’ was to work Saturdays in the gardens, meaning he didn’t have the opportunity to go into town.

“Over the years, though, I could see what I was doing and I started becoming more responsible.”

Every summer, Dustin flew home to Ebeye. “Generally I worked at Queen of Peace helping with the summer school. They’d call our house and ask for help. That’s something I really liked doing, working with the students, especially those who were struggling.”

Aeto and Maggie Bantol both flew to Chuuk for their son’s graduation, which was a proud moment for him. “My heart is with Xavier and I will always be a proud alumni,” he said.

The family arrived back in Ebeye in May. “I’d applied to some Jesuit schools in the States and was accepted by one,” he said, “but I wanted to just go back to Ebeye, saying to everyone ‘I’m done with school’.” The elder Bantols, though, had other plans and sent him to stay with Brenda Alik, a relative, in Majuro.

“I’ll never forget the day she picked me up at the airport. I thought she’d take me over to CMI (College of the Marshall Islands), but instead she took me to the USP

project (RMI-USP Joint Education Program).” He applied and was admitted, adding that he believes he was the first ever Xavier graduate to attend the program. “RMI-USP was different at first, but I’m a good learner and it doesn’t take me long to ‘get it.’ Mind you, it was a huge transition from the American system to the British system. The US system is much more about general knowledge, whereas the British is more specific. Whatever you intend to do, that’s what they’re going to teach you.”

Dustin slid fairly easily through the Preliminary year, having joined it in May of 1999, and then on through the Foundation year. “When I finished at USP, I again thought I was done with education. I was at home on Ebeye enjoying my Christmas when the late Masilina (Sefeti) called.

“She didn’t say ‘how are you’ or anything to open the conversation. She said ‘what are you doing there and you should be here because you’ve just been accepted at the Fiji School of Medicine in its Oral Health.’ I was very confused, especially as I never signed any application form. She did it for me, the application, and I really respect her for that. I could see how much she sacrificed to get us all into school. She was strict, but that was a good thing.”

At that time, Dustin had occasionally considered studying to become a medical doctor. “Then, all of a sudden, here I was going to be a dentist. And I didn’t have much time to start on it. I think I did everything like coming to Majuro and organizing my RMI Scholarship and booking a plane... everything happened in less than two weeks.”

Aside from the surprise that Masilina had applied for him to go to dentist school, there was an even bigger one awaiting him in the course in the downtown Suva school. “You see,” he explained with a laugh, “I’d never had any cavities or tooth pain in my life, so I was completely lost about the concept of what a dentist did. Oh well, I went with the flow.”

Dustin’s entry into life in Suva was made easier because he and another Marshallese friend went to stay in an apartment with other Marshallese. “The scholarship money paid for our rent.” Academically, though, his first year was a bit of a struggle and by the second year his grades were down and he failed two courses. “That’s when I met my wife, who was a pharmaceutical student at the same school, and she became pregnant. “She returned to Majuro after the first semester and didn’t finish school,” he said, ruefully adding: “I blame myself for that.”

He partied a lot that year and failed the classes. “At Fiji School of Medicine you aren’t allowed to fail anything, so I had to repeat a year.” Unable to get a second RMI Scholarship, instead his parents sponsored him. That and the fact that he had

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a pregnant wife made him turn himself around. "I pumped up all my grades the next year. I had my parents and my wife, Centilina, telling me all the time that I needed to be responsible."

His wife gave birth and his 'beautiful daughter' was to be eight months old before he first laid eyes on her. "They were the fuel in my education from that time on," he said. "Any time I was losing hope, they always helped me get through. My wife and kids were the inspiration of my getting a degree."

Also helping financially was the World Health Organization, which funded Dustin's studies for his final three years at the Fiji School of Medicine.

As the five-year course transpired, academically the work became tougher. "The thing is that I had it easier than many other Marshallese students. I already knew how to look after myself from going away to Xavier, whereas the others were often homesick and didn't know what to do.

"Sure, I still drank sometimes, but some students who don't make it and drop out often blame it on the partying and alcohol. I don't agree.

"It's all about time management. Let's say there's a really good party on that night, but you have an exam the next morning. I would sacrifice the party ... it's only one night ... and work for the next morning's exam."

His technique worked and, in 2006, he graduated and soon began work at Majuro Hospital. "There are two other dentists in the department," he said, "which population-wise is not enough. But we all get on very well, so it doesn't seem too bad. We're a good team." His colleagues are i-Kiribati and Filipina.

"My goal is to see more Marshallese dentists and doctors in the hospital," he said. "It's very important that your patient can explain a problem in minute detail. It's the only way to make a good diagnosis. I can tell that my Marshallese patients really appreciate it that I can speak to them in my own language."

Yes. Exactly. So to the second verse of Dustin Bantol's song from that oh so special graduation day in Chuuk: "There's a silver linin' - it's out there somewhere; Everybody wants an answer - everybody needs a friend; We all need a shinin' star on which we can depend."

Shine on, Dustin.







