



TERRAPINS
MARYLAND

HENRY PETER
Marshall Islands Club
Alumni of the University
of the South Pacific



HENRY PETER

Doing it for Dad

EDUCATION

Elementary

1988-1992: Seventh Day Adventists Elementary School, Marshall Islands

1992-1994: Assumption Elementary School, Marshall Islands

Secondary

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

Tertiary

2000: RMI-USP Joint Education Project (Foundation program), Marshall Islands

2001-2004: University of the South Pacific, Fiji



“Goofing off”; “hiding to do the bad stuff like drinking”; “slacking off”; “on probation” are all phrases that paint Henry Peter’s academic career into a graphic, colorful picture. Add “my education will never end” and you have a person who fully understands perseverance and not giving up on goals.

“My BA (Bachelor of Arts) won’t get me where I want to go,” the big, beefy guy with a mop of shaggy curls said. “I want to be somewhere higher and a Master’s degree will open up a whole lot more opportunities for me.” To this end, Henry is applying to do his Master’s Degree in Business Administration at the University of the South Pacific’s (USP) Majuro campus starting in May, 2010. “I know I can help this country if I can join the more qualified workforce.”

The son of Heldia and Kimbar Peter, Henry was born on January 31, 1981, becom-

ing the baby of the family with one older brother and four older sisters. At the age of seven, his parents enrolled him in the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Elementary School in Delap, which all his siblings attended. “That’s not my religion, though,” he said. “My Mom is Protestant and my Dad was Catholic, so I’m a bit of each.”

Did he like being sent to school? “Ummm,” he said with a sheepish grin, “I think I would have preferred to stay home and enjoy life and play games. Plus, at home we spoke Marshallese, so going to SDA (which held lessons in English) was difficult. I think my Dad wanted me to learn to speak English, because he knew it was important.”

In sixth grade, Kimbar switched Henry to Assumption Elementary School (AES) because “he wanted me to follow in his path. The courses there were tougher.”

Up to this point Henry generally scored somewhere in the middle of his grade. “But I always wanted to be on the honor roll, and sometimes I’d make it.” Why was being on the honor roll a goal?

“Dad would always tell me that if I made the honor roll he’d reward me ... give me what I want, such as a pair of roller blades, other toys or a Nintendo game. But if I didn’t make it, he’d lecture me that if I didn’t do well then I would struggle later on. He’d say: ‘If you do well now your future will be better’ ... he was always talking about the future.”

Nearing the end of his elementary school years, Henry had his mind set on going to Saint Louis Catholic high school in Hawaii. I wanted to be a football star,” he said. “I already did okay in basketball and soccer and I thought going to an American school would be great.” But Kimbar had other plans for his youngest son and introduced him to two Catholic Sisters, who told him about Xavier High School in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia.

“Even so, I still applied for Saint Louis, but I never heard back from them, so I sat the test for Xavier and did okay.”

Before long, he was at Amata Kabua International Airport saying farewell to his Mom and sisters, who were all crying. “I was crying too,” Henry said, “but I didn’t want to show it.” He was met at Chuuk Airport by the dean of students and soon settled into his new life.

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grades if you didn't work hard. It was a struggle sometimes, but I managed."

One factor that helped Henry's studies was that he and a few friends formed a study group, which would get together almost every night. "It was quite easy to do that, because from Sunday to Thursday there would be a 'study hour' from 7pm to 9:30pm in the study hall, with a prefect (senior student) playing watchdog."

Each Christmas, Henry came home to his beloved Majuro for vacation. "I'd relax with my friends, maybe drink a bit ... but we'd hide to do the bad stuff. I knew my parents would be mad if they caught me drinking vodka or beer ... but I never got caught."

Back in Chuuk, Henry had a sponsor family who'd he'd visit with most weekends. "Xavier is on Weno Island, which is the capital of Chuuk, while the school is at Mabuchi Hill, about 30 minutes out of town. My sponsor family would come and pick me up and I'd help with family chores."

Henry did moderately well at his studies in ninth grade, but in tenth grade he found himself on a slippery slope downwards. "I started skipping Mass, things like that," he said. "And then me and some boys broke some school property." Oh dear.

"There was an old building that they'd said they were going to renovate. Anyway one day the school won the local basketball league and me and my friends were a little crazy and went to the building and started kicking in the louvers. We thought we were helping," Henry laughed.

"We got suspended for a week after that. We could stay in the dorm, but instead of going to school we had to cut grass with a machete. All day we cut grass. Look (he points to a scar on his hand), that's from being tired and switching the machete to my left hand and, whack, I'd cut myself."

Did the week of manual labor teach Henry a lesson? "Oh yeah! I thought I was going to be expelled! One thing I do not like is not finishing something I've started. I don't want to put shame upon myself.

Around this time, Henry received the sad phone call that his much-loved father had passed away. "Of course I came back to Majuro for the funeral, but ended up missing some of my exams, which were on at the same time.

"But after he died, I decided to focus more on my work: I thought I should fulfill all of his dreams." Still in the middle of his class in grades, Henry now moved up a notch and managed to be on the honor roll a couple of times. "I had to work at it though," he said. "I had some classmates who didn't need to study to get good grades, but I had to work hard."

Finally, Henry slid into twelfth grade in 1999 and began to make plans for the next step up the academic ladder. "I knew I wanted to go to college in the States and I'd picked Stanford University (in California). During our senior year, we had a college 'prep' series that helped us to choose our options and how to fill in college applica-

tions.” He duly sent off his application to Stanford but, like his attempt to get into Saint Louis, he did not receive a response.

”It was really stupid of me to only apply for one college. I was so convinced I’d get in,” and at this he laughs, recognizing the need to have at least three options was the more sensible route. “So I came back to Majuro at the end of May. I was just hanging out or helping out my Mom, who is self-employed.

Then, one day, he bumped into some of his old buddies from Assumption who had attended the RMI-USP Preliminary program. “My friends told me it was tough at USP and I always like a challenge, so I applied. But they (the principal) told me I would have to do the Preliminary year first. I didn’t want to do that because my friends had moved up to the Foundation year, so I asked Marcelini (Se-feti) if I could try doing Foundation, and if I didn’t do well I’d go down. She said okay.”

Remembering how much homework he had at Xavier, he was surprised that USP required even more study. “I worked hard, staying back at the school each night to do assignments. My teachers were all islanders: Indo-Fijian, Tongan, or Fijian,” he said, adding “that in his first semester he had some difficulties with their accents.”

A large part of Foundation year is working out where students want to go to college. “I wanted to go to New Zealand, mainly because it’s a first world country. I didn’t feel like going to another island nation, so I applied for a couple of colleges in New Zealand,” but for the third time in his life he didn’t receive a response.

“My teacher told me that going to USP in Suva (Fiji) would be the best for me and that I was sure to get in. I realized I had to go somewhere, so I applied for that.” He also received an RMI scholarship to pay for his tuition and board.

Sure enough, he was accepted at USP and his Mom and one of his sisters were yet again at Majuro Airport to farewell their ‘baby’. “No crying this time!” he giggled.

Once in Fiji, Henry chose to major in Business Management and Public Administration with a minor in History and Politics. “In the first year I did okay. But the second year was when I flopped most of my courses. I just wasn’t focused,” he said ruefully.

“I’d go to my lectures, but I wasn’t doing my reading and research.” As a result he was put on the probation list and because his grade point average (GPA) was too

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low, he was suspended from his scholarship. This was not a high point in his life so far.

“On probation, you still go to school, but you’re on a ‘watch list’ and if you don’t bring up your GPA you won’t be allowed to continue.”

As the Scholarship Board had suspended him, Henry’s Mom was forced to pay for his living and boarding expenses. “Because the Marshall Islands is part of the USP ‘family’, my tuition was waived.”

The humiliation of all this “woke me up from my dreamland,” Henry said with sincerity. “I stopped partying and when friends would come around and say let’s go out, I’d say no, that I have to stay home and study. I’d made the decision to work hard.”

By the end of that year, he’d managed to pull up his GPA and was no longer on probation and in his third year at USP he was back on scholarship. “I had to retake some of the courses, which added a semester to my time at college. My advice to kids now is to study hard, then reward yourself for your good work. Party only when you know you did something good, but not all the time.”

In his third year at USP he also moved out of the dorms and into an apartment near the university with some friends and girlfriend Chinilla Pedro, who is also Marshallese. “It was cheaper in the apartment as we shared the rent and we all put in money for food. Sometimes we’d eat out, but we’d often cook together. We made lots of stews using beef or pork; they have all kinds of meat in Fiji.”

Again, joining a study group helped Henry do better in his studies. “The teachers helped arrange us into groups and we’d do projects together, which I found very helpful.”

Each Christmas, Henry would come home to Majuro and help his Mom in her business. But it was a happy day in 2005 that Mom came to see him in Fiji and watch him graduate in his silky brown gown. “She was so proud of me,” he said.

Not long before then, Henry had a big lucky break when Sandy Alfred, the then administrator at Majuro Hospital, flew into Suva to talk to potential graduates. “Sandy told me was starting a new quality management department at the hospital and asked if I was interested in heading it up. I said okay.”

As soon as Henry arrived home, “I rang Sandy up and he explained to me that I had to apply through PSC (the Public Service commission). I did that, but it’s a process that takes time. I think I waited for more than three months, during which I continued to help my Mom.”

Finally, though, he was given the job, which he found a challenge. “My main problem was that I didn’t have a clinical background.” He did, however, have a quality assurance nurse and an infection control nurse working with him. “We were trying to be accredited by the Joint Commission International or at least to conform to appli-

cable standards set by this body. This is a standardizing organization for hospitals..”

After two years in this department, Henry was promoted to look after the Administration Support Services at the hospital. “I found I was better suited to this job as it wasn’t clinical. Instead I supervised the medical records, the security department, housekeeping, the morgue and the maintenance department.” He had about 25 employees working for him and his administration/management courses were put to good use.

In 2008 and early 2009, Henry was disappointed that despite his promotion, his wages had not been raised to commensurate/match his position, so “after writing letters and getting nowhere, I resigned.” And he was back to helping his Mom, but he still has ambitions of working in a higher level job.

“That’s why I’ve applied to do the MBA at USP,” he said. “I really want to aim higher and a Master’s would allow me to do that. I’d love to work for an international organization, such as the UN (United Nations), especially if it allowed me to be based here.”

If his application is successful, chances are Henry Peter won’t repeat his earlier mistakes of “goofing off” or ending up “on probation”. He’s been down many times in his academic life ... but he’ll never be out.