



JENNIFER SERU
College of the Marshall Islands
Alumni of the University
of the South Pacific



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The three Rs:

Responsibility, Respect, and Results



"The challenge is getting the students to take responsibility for their own learning," Jennifer Seru said with force as she sat in the shade on the front lawn of the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI).

"When I taught at 'Majuro Middle School,' many kids would cut class; most of the time only half of the students would hand in their homework; and a good number came to school without the necessary materials"

This is a far cry from Jennifer's own education, where school attendance, doing assignments on time, and being equipped with the right school supplies are a high priority. "In Fiji, teachers are respected: If you're walking down

EDUCATION

Pre-school

1973-1976: Wright Play Center, Fiji Elementary

Elementary

1977-1981: Namena District School, Fiji

Secondary

1982-1988: Adi Cakobau School, Fiji

Tertiary

1990-1991: Lautoka Teachers College, Primary Teacher's Certificate
1996-2004: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands, BA in Geography/Tourism

2001-2003: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands, Certificate in Geographical Information Systems
2006-2009: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands, Masters Degree in Education

a corridor, the students will move aside for you; which is just the opposite of my first experience here.”

Having respect for your teacher leads to paying attention in class, which in turn means the students learn more. “This lack of responsibility extends to their parents, too,” Jennifer said.

“Only a little more than half of the parents would come to collect their child’s report card,” she said, explaining that this takes place at the end of each quarter. “Also, in the majority of cases -- about 90 percent -- it would only be the mother who came. Even then, she would just accept the card and not ask questions about how their child is doing; they don’t look for reasons why their child isn’t doing well.”

A big reason for this was a language barrier as Jennifer is not fluent in Marshallese, so when necessary she would seek the help of a multi-lingual colleague to communicate with a parent. “But this didn’t really help,” she said.

To try and elevate parents’ roles in the education process, Jennifer devised a system of requiring parents to sign their child’s special homework book each evening. The plan failed and was disbanded. “I feel that, in general, the parents’ mentality is that placing their kids in school is their job and the rest is the schools responsibility: academic, physical, social, and development.”

Jennifer believes that changing and improving parents’ educational mentality can be achieved through informal education.

Her own childhood memories bear no resemblance to this tale, with her mother (Anasaini Seru) being her teacher both in school and out.

“My mum was my first teacher, when she taught at the Wright Play Center, which I attended for three years (1973 to 1976). Those years formed the basis of my education. I really believe a pre-school experience is important because it forms that solid foundation of letters and numbers, which is necessary for your educational experiences in the future.”

In 1977, Jennifer followed her elder siblings (she is number eight of nine children) to attend Namena District School.

“I recall that I was an average student,” she said, “But I remember always getting a prize at the awards day at the end of each year. My favorite subject was social studies ... I loved learning about history, lifestyle, culture and tradition, which I believe

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makes me what I am today -- 'a people person.' We also spent a lot of time learning about other Pacific Islands."

Jennifer did well enough in elementary school to be chosen to attend the elite Adi Cakobau School. "It was an all-girls government boarding school, which only accepted the cream of the crop from the elementary schools around the country." But leaving home was hard for the young lady. "For the first few weeks I cried and cried and wanted desperately to go home. But then I started to make friends and gradually adapted to the change and I remember on my last day at boarding school I didn't want to leave. It had become like home and my friends have become my family"

Students at the high school were very competitive and Jennifer had to work hard to keep her grades up. "After school each day, we had our duties to take care of -- such as collecting coconuts and scrubbing the bathrooms -- and then we'd have two hours of study after dinner." Sadly, though, she didn't work quite hard enough to graduate from sixth form (the US system's twelfth grade) and had to repeat her final year.

"The first time I did sixth form I was house captain (an elected position), which had a lot of extra-curricular responsibilities attached to it. I was in charge of a group of girls and had to do things like checking that beds were made, bathrooms were cleaned, trash cans emptied, and a friendly relationship maintained. I also had to organize games and fun activities for entertainment. I took pleasure in the role, but it kept me away from my studies. Plus it was the 'teenage time,'" meaning a mind straying too often to the social side of life.

Jennifer lived off campus for her repeat year. "I stayed with a relative, but that meant I had to leave home at 6am each day, then take a bus to town and then another to the school. Attempting twelfth grade the second time woke me up, so I worked a lot harder that year. I was living with my older brother, whom under my mum's advice kept a strict eye on me so that I was focused on my studies."

During this time, Jennifer's favorite subject was geography. "We did quite a few field trips and one was a visit to the hotels on the Coral Coast. I really enjoyed that and decided that I wanted to work in tourism and hospitality after graduating." So when it came to filling out her career choices in her final year, she chose hospitality first and teacher training second. The first acceptance came from Lautoka Teachers College, which came with a government scholarship, so she elected to do that and headed over to the west side of Viti Levu to start her new life.

"At that time, they were having a mass recruitment for teachers and invited college students to teach part-time and study part-time. I did that for my first year of college; with the bonus being that I was paid about \$180 (every two weeks) for teaching third and fourth grades."

The head teacher at the school quickly became her mentor, giving her advice and showing her the ropes. With her experience of watching her mother and other teachers and being a leader at school had prepared her well for her first year's

teaching experience. "The only concern was that the students were from rural villages and many of them didn't speak English. But it was wonderful seeing them develop their language skills and towards the end of the year I had learnt to speak their language and they were confident in speaking English. Plus," she said with a laugh, "I loved the Indian students because they would invite me home for wonderful curries."

After that first dip into teaching, Jennifer then studied at the Lautoka College full time for her second and third years, receiving her certificate in teaching in 1991. At this point, Jennifer revealed her method for studying, which may not be the prescribed way, but is one which works for her.

"I'm the type of person who extends until the last minute to finish assignments. I'll sit up the night before one's due and work until midnight or 3am in the morning. When I'm under pressure I think better."

After graduating, Jennifer took a job at a village school and then switched to teach sixth grade at Navesi Primary School in Suva. By now she had put together all her education experiences from her mother, her mentor, and her own studies to create a successful teaching method. "I make the students feel comfortable in class," she stressed. "If they're scared they won't be able to learn. Mostly I'll open a class with a game or a story or joke and then deliver the lesson. Interaction in the class is important and I try to make sure it's student centered, with a lot of activities."

Jennifer also believes that breaking a class into groups is a good thing. "There are times when students find learning clearer from their peers than their teachers."

Then 1995 came around and Jennifer's mother, Ana, and her father, Tevita Seru, asked her to join them in Majuro. "I had to come, because she asked me to, but I was happy, especially because the teachers' pay in the Marshall Islands is about double what I made in Fiji."

Her first job in RMI was at Rita Christian School, where she received an instant wake-up call to the differences between the two countries. "Students' attitude towards their teachers and learning is so different to how it is in Fiji." The students were also reluctant or too shy to speak up in class, for fear of being ridiculed or laughed at by others. "But I really worked at getting them to open up and feel comfortable and confident speaking English in front of their peers."

Soon after arriving in Majuro, Jennifer's father gave her some words of wisdom. "He sat me down and told me that my teacher's certificate wasn't enough for a

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future, saying ‘there will come a time when that certificate won’t get you anywhere, all the doors will be closed’.” His encouragement for her to further her studies and her mum’s financial aid led Jennifer to the doorstep of the University of the South Pacific’s Delap campus.

Still working at Rita Christian, she chose to take a geography and tourism course on a part-time basis, meaning she had to complete two units every semester. “I was still interested in following a career in hospitality, which is why I focused on tourism,” she said. As a Fijian outside Fiji, Jennifer could not get a scholarship at home for her tuition, so her mother helped her out (“I owe her thousands!”).

In 2001, Jennifer made a career move to Middle School, signed up for a second program at USP, and gave birth to her son ‘CJ’. “Having CJ and realizing the responsibility involved boosted my determination to complete my first degree. I’ve never regretted having him, because instead of being an obstacle to my studies he became the driving force towards my educational achievement.”

Her new course was a Certificate in Geographical information Systems (GIS), which elder sister, Va Savu, was doing and also tied in neatly with the geography side of her degree. “Actually, Irene (USP Director Dr. Irene Taafaki) encouraged Va and I to do the course and I’m so glad she did. Irene is really the reason I’ve been able to achieve all this. She knows what’s best for us and what the country needs and helps us to get it done: She has great leadership.”

The years between 1996 and 2003 slid by, with Jennifer working, studying, raising a child, and being a significant member of Majuro’s large and vibrant Fijian community. She achieved her GIS certificate and finished her Bachelor’s degree and finally donned her graduation gown in Suva in early 2004. “I took my mum down to the graduation. She’d given me so much; it was time for her to receive the returns of her investment in my education.”

Back in Majuro, Jennifer felt it was time “to give my brain a rest.” But a year or so later, she was back hitting the books. “I decided it was time to do my Master’s degree,” she said, adding that by this time she’d abandoned the idea of hospitality and was seeing education as her future.

“I could see how important it is to preach and promote education, especially for us Pacific islanders. It’s the only way we can be competitive in the global market.”

Having taught all ages in elementary and high schools, Jennifer wanted to experience teaching at a tertiary level, for which she needed the Master’s degree. “Going back to school didn’t seem like a big decision to me, because I’d been in the system for so long.” But the higher degree didn’t come easily. “I’ve still not got out of the habit of doing everything at the last minute,” she said. “And the Master’s degree was much more intensive, time-wise, intellectually, physically, and socially.

“It took a lot of quality family time away from my mum and son. For example, I had one assignment due online, and when the deadline comes around that’s it, the

machine won't let you submit it, so it's got to be finished on time. Anyway, I sat one whole day from 8am to 3am the next morning getting it done. That can be tiring!"

It took Jennifer three years to achieve her Master's of Education, which came with a number of bonuses. "I took my mother down to my graduation in Suva again, which she enjoyed, to receive her second investment return.

"And people I know and work with saw me get my degree and asked me how I did it. My achievement made them realize that they can do it too," a fact she's obviously proud of. Her success also made her eligible for a position at CMI, so she applied for and was given a job teaching developmental education in the fall of 2009. Other benefits from the college are that her son receives tuition assistance from the college for attending another WASC accredited school (Majuro Cooperative School).

Plus, Jennifer is enjoying her new role with adult students, some of whom are older than her, but she has some tips for her students: "Number one is commitment and prioritizing your studies. Number two is to have the right attitude and mindset towards school. Number three is to be determined and work hard to succeed.

"Some of my students aren't serious enough about being at college, with a few just signing up for something to do. That's a waste of everyone's time and taxpayers' money. Education is everyone's responsibility; the return is for everyone's benefit."

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
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