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JOSEPH TIBON

Bad boy turns his life around

EDUCATION

ELEMENTARY

1987: Head Start, Majuro

1988: Assumption kindergarten

1989-1996: Laura Elementary School

SECONDARY

1996-1998: Seventh Day Adventist High School

1998-2000: Marshall Islands High School

TERTIARY

2000-2001: College of the Marshall Islands

2001-2003: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands

2004-2009: University of the South Pacific, Fiji



*Hi Junior,
Knowing that you're having lots of fun at USP in Fiji, I'd really like it if you would read the following story with care. I hope it makes a difference!*

*Love,
Your brother, Joseph*

By any measure, Joseph Tibon was not a good student. In fact, for much of the time, he wasn't a student at all.

"In elementary school I'd wait for my parents to go to work and then I'd go to the lagoon to play with my friends ... Or sometimes I just stayed in the house. Once I skipped class for a whole week. Of course, the teachers told my Dad, who was mad

at me and he whacked me with a newspaper. “Part of the problem was that I was the youngest in my class and I was scared of the bigger boys. That came about because my uncle registered me in school and I ended up by mistake in second grade (rather than first).”

Second grade was at Laura Elementary School, which he attended after having started his education at Head Start in Delap, followed by kindergarten at Assumption School. The middle child of five – “I have two brothers and two sisters” –Joseph was born on June 15, 1982.

Despite not attending elementary school on a regular basis, Joseph made it through his early grades relatively unscathed. But this education was in Marshallese, “so my English skills were pretty bad,” Joseph said. Following elementary, he was enrolled at the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) High School in Delap, where the teaching was conducted in English. “I could understand most of it, but didn’t feel that I could speak it, so I never put my hand up in class to answer a question.” This was said with an emphatic laugh and a shake of the head.

But his attendance at high school was, at first, slightly better than his elementary days. “My parents were paying for the tuition, which was expensive, so I felt guilty and tried to have better attendance.” But this attempt wore thin and before long he was skipping classes: “If you miss three days at SDA, you get suspended,” Joseph said. “And I almost did...”

Nevertheless, he made it through ninth and tenth grades at SDA and then convinced his parents, Jorelik and Lydia Tibon, to allow him to attend Marshall Islands High School (MIHS), where most of his buddies were students. “I was much happier at MIHS, especially as they’d put me in the vocational courses, such as mechanics.

“But I didn’t find the studies that easy. I did have one teacher who ran the class in Marshallese, which made it easier for me.”

Being happier with his buddies didn’t mean that attendance was high on Joseph’s priority list. “We were into drinking (vodka) and we’d drink in the morning, skipping class, and then go to the afternoon classes drunk.”

How did he pay for the alcohol? “I’d use my lunch money or we’d steal tools from the auto shop and sell them to people living nearby. We’d maybe get \$70 for some of the tools.”

And looking back, what does he think of this truancy and bad behavior? “I feel stupid,” he said with vigor. “It was a complete waste of time. “You know, I hung out with the meanest guys in school; they were really tough guys and I thought I was tough

‘We were into drinking (vodka) and we’d drink in the morning, skipping class, and then go to the afternoon classes drunk.’

too.” It wasn’t only his friends who were nasty. “In eleventh grade I had a teacher who was really mean. He used corporal punishment: He’d take a big ruler and get you to hold your fingers up and then he’d hit the tips of your fingers. It really hurt.”

For a time, Joseph had a Fijian teacher, whose style of teaching was an amazing revelation for Joseph. “The Fijians really help you. They sit with you and go through the problem with you, telling you to ‘use your head’.”

Finally, Joseph graduated from high school in 2000, with no real plans for his future. “I decided to go to CMI (College of the Marshall Islands).” And how did he find the switch to tertiary education? With a sad laugh, he said: “I didn’t have to spend so much time in class, so I had more time to drink.”

During his first year at CMI, Joseph heard a number of people talking about the University of the South Pacific (USP). “Everyone was saying USP was tough, but my parents thought I should give it a try. I told them I wasn’t good enough.” Despite this, Joseph’s mother, Lydia, enrolled him at the school, telling him one evening: “You’re going to USP tomorrow.”

“I was really mad about that,” Joseph said. “So I punished her by continuing to drink, using my lunch money to buy the alcohol, then I’d go to my auntie’s house in Rita for lunch.”

Classes in the USP Preliminary year were from 8am to 4pm, but Joseph would barely make it to one class a day. “They called my Mom,” said Joseph, “and I told her that it was too tough for me without trying. She said ‘That’s because you’re not doing your studies.’ I thought to myself, ‘they want me to study every night: Wow! That’s suicide!’”

So, without his parents knowing, “I just stopped going to classes.”

But then Joseph experienced a life-changing event. One that would reverse his trend of heading down the road to nowhere. “In December of that year, our two-story house in Laura burnt down. We lost all our belongings.

“We moved into the recording studio, which was behind the house.

“That night I found my Mom sitting by the burned-out house. She was crying, but nobody could calm her or get her to come into the studio. She stayed there until morning.”

The realization that his mother was so sad to have lost so much that she and her husband had built up over the years flicked a switch in Joseph’s brain. “I realized that night that I wanted to make my parents proud of me.”

Again he was enrolled in the USP Preliminary program and “I thought that this time I will do better.” He cut down on his drinking and found new classmates (“all my old friends had dropped out”). “The new kids were different; they were really into their

studies and that helped me to work too. In my first semester I passed all my classes, except for math, which I had problems with.

“In the second semester,” Joseph proudly said, “I passed all my classes. I’d studied hard at home because I’d been told that I had to pass to get into the Foundation year. My Dad helped a lot – he’s a mathematical freak – and I remember they were really surprised when in Geography I even got the highest result in my class.”

This achievement made Joseph even more “aggressive” academically. “I became competitive with the other students and every night at home I’d work with my Dad on my studies. He was really happy, always asking me if I had any homework and asking if he could help. “I ended up doing okay in my Foundation year. You know, CMI is good, but USP is much more demanding: They make sure you understand what they’re teaching to the point where you can truly say ‘Okay! I get it!’”

Much of USP’s Foundation year is spent deciding on which tertiary institution students will move on to. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I didn’t really want to go overseas, so I thought that after I finished Foundation I’d go to the USP Majuro campus. I was in my ‘first love’ and really wanted to stay in Majuro.” Unbeknownst to him, his teachers applied for him to attend USP in Fiji. “It was really stupid because I missed the deadlines for the scholarships from Australia and New Zealand.”

Nevertheless, Joseph was accepted by USP’s Laucala, Suva, campus and the Majuro principal called me and told me to apply for the RMI scholarship. “But I still didn’t want to leave here and decided to skip classes to avoid my teachers asking me to apply. It was just two weeks to the end of the school year. Then my girlfriend and I got into a fight, so I flipped and decided I wanted to run away.

“I went to my Geography teacher and asked if there was still room for me in Fiji. He said: ‘You know the deadline is tomorrow!’ and asked me what I wanted to study. I said I didn’t know and asked him to help me, so he gave me a list of courses.

“I still couldn’t decide, so he chose environmental studies for me, partly because at the time my Dad was the General Manager at EPA (Environmental Protection Authority).”

So, early in 2004, Joseph and about nine other USP students flew to Fiji to begin the next level in their academic lives.” We arrived at Nausori airport and the RMI Ambassador to Fiji, Mack Kaminaga, who’s married to my auntie, was there to pick us up

‘But I still didn’t want to leave here and decided to skip classes to avoid my teachers asking me to apply. It was just two weeks to the end of the school year.’

and take us to the campus. "I was really amazed at how big the campus was. It was a bit scary because there were all these big, muscular guys there, some wearing skirts."

Joseph and his buddies were given rooms in the campus dorms: "The dorms were a set of two-story buildings, with each having 32 rooms. I didn't really like the room; it was pretty small with a fan, a closet, a table and study light and a bed. We all used the bathroom down the hall. There were three Marshallese in my dorm."

The first week at USP was orientation, but the campus was so large "it was confusing. I got lost on my first day! We went to classes where they prepared us for studying at college, particularly about taking notes. But I got it wrong and thought I had to write down every word, so initially I spent a lot of time just writing down what the teacher was saying and not understanding any of it.

"Now I know that you only need to write down new pieces of information or interesting parts (of the lecture). Then, the night of the lecture I'd go through the notes and if I had questions I'd write those down to ask the teacher the next day."

And how did Joseph's first year go? "Bad," he said with a sigh.

"My first semester was good and I failed only one out of four. This was because I had no money, so I stayed in my room each night and read a book. Plus I was very homesick; I missed my parents and I'd made up with my girlfriend before I left, so I was missing her. I'd cry some nights. Yes, I cried."

At about this time, a representative of the RMI Government, Minister Witten Philip-po, and the President of CMI, Wilson Hess, visited the Laucala campus. "Myself and the other Marshallese students told them about the insufficient financial assistance we were getting and they told us they would do something about it."

The pair of gentlemen made good on their words and within a few months the ri-Majol students were receiving a healthier amount from their scholarships. This, however, was not necessarily a beneficial turn of events for Joseph. "I used the money to go clubbing and I started slacking off in school. My second semester was a disaster: I didn't pass any courses and was suspended from USP and the scholarship."

He returned home for Christmas and while here realized that he did indeed want to continue his education, "plus I missed being independent."

With his parents help, Joseph returned to Fiji for the second semester. "I worked hard and passed all my courses," he said. "Some of it was fun, too," he said. "As part of environmental studies, we studied agriculture, squatter settlements, landfill, and mountains, thus we went on lots of field trips to villages or took rides in boats to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)."

During each Christmas vacation following that semester, Joseph returned to Majuro. "In 2006 the Minister in Assistance, Witten Philippo, asked me if I'd like to work and I ended up doing an internship here at OEPPC (Office of Environmental Planning and

Policy Coordination). I did filing and helped the project coordinators do their research or help at workshops and meetings.”

Then it was back to Suva for his third year. “I didn’t do well that year. Five of us moved out of the dorm and rented an apartment. We were always broke; I often didn’t have money for food or a taxi to school, meaning I sometimes missed my classes.” Eventually his grades were so bad he again lost his scholarship and had to drop out of school. “I came back to work at OEPPC because they’d been looking for an intern to help out and I was the first Marshallese student to have done Environmental Studies. I enjoyed the job, but I always discovered that I wanted to go back and finish my schooling.”

Joseph’s ever-supporting parents picked up the tab “and I went back as a private student for two more years. I felt bad about this because they’d sacrificed so much for me, so I wanted to make sure I did well. I was also lucky, because for a time I stayed with the auntie who’s married to the Ambassador (Kaminaga) and this meant I didn’t have to spend much on taxi fares and food.”

Later, Joseph returned to the Laucala campus dorms while he finished his degree. Finally, in 2009, Joseph graduated with a BA on Environmental Studies, much to his and his parents’ relief.

Joseph is now enjoying his role as the Technical Policy Officer at OEPPC. “I plan to stay and work here, building my knowledge, for the next two or three years. Then I plan to go to New Zealand or Australia and do my Master’s degree. I’m interested in Environmental Law and Environmental Development.”

Meanwhile, while Joseph was finishing his degree in Suva, his younger brother Junior had also enrolled at the Laucala campus.

“How’s he doing?”

“Oh, he’s a popular guy and likes to party, although he doesn’t drink. Before I left I gave him lots of advice, but I don’t think he listened to me.”

“Maybe you should send him your story?”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
Majuro, Marshall Islands, April, 2010*