



KEYOKA KABUA
Ministry of
Foreign Affairs
Alumni of the
University
of the South
Pacific



KEYOKA KABUA

Combining a BA with babies

EDUCATION

ELEMENTARY

1982-1990: Assumption
Elementary School,
Marshall Islands

SECONDARY

1990-1991: Marshall
Islands High School

1991-1993: Assumption
High School

1993-1994: Marshall
Islands High School

TERTIARY

1994-1995: College of the
Marshall Islands

1996-1997: University of
the South Pacific,
Marshall Islands

1998-2002: University of
Waikato, New Zealand

1998-?: Master of Political
Science candidate,
University of the South
Pacific, Marshall Islands



"I got home from university in New Zealand with a B.A. and a B.A.B.Y.," laughed Keyoka Kabua as she recalled her arrival at Amata Kabua International Airport and remembered her family and friends' surprise (perhaps shock would be a better word) at seeing her new infant about whom they nothing.

"I hadn't told anyone about her, so I told everyone to come to the airport to meet me." That included her parents, Phillip and Herine Kabua, who had with them Keyoka's first child, Herisa, who was born in Keyoka's first year of college.

How does a young mother of two manage to live in another country on a slim budget and earn her Bachelor's degree? With a lot of determination and the support of caring parents, as Keyoka's tale shows.

Born on April 11, 1976, Keyoka began her academic life in kindergarten at Ma-

juro's largest Catholic school, Assumption, in 1982. "I absolutely loved going to school," she said, which is fortunate because her parents were very keen that all their nine children receive a good education. "My father graduated from the University of Santa Clara in California, but my mom only did three grades of elementary school. She had a really hard life; she lived in Rongrong (Majuro). Finally her great uncle brought her back (to town) and when she was 16 or 17 she graduated from elementary school. Because my mom wasn't so educated, she always pushed for us all to finish school."

To help the children do well in school, father Phillip -- who is now the Marshall Islands' Ambassador to Taiwan -- often spoke English at home. "I studied hard at school. I wouldn't say I was that bright, but my parents made sure we did our homework straight after school. Plus I have never been shy; if I wanted to know something in class I'd just raise my hand," which is something many Marshallese students are too shy to do.

Keyoka was also very active in school. "I was on the student body and played lots of sport: Volleyball, baseball, track and field," and here she laughed, adding. "I'm short, but I'm quick."

In 1990, Keyoka graduated from elementary school and it was time for her to move up to high school. "It was expected that I'd stay on at Assumption," she said, "but my Dad was in (Washington) DC for diplomatic training for three months and I desperately wanted to go to Marshall Islands High School (MIHS) to be with my friends, so I just went down to the school and enrolled myself. I took the placement test and got in, but when Dad came home he was mad at me. I argued with him and said 'I'm staying'." So that was that, for a year at least.

"After ninth grade, Dad made me go back to Assumption, because he felt it was a better school. While MIHS offered the same classes as Assumption, they didn't discipline us that much."

Keyoka's best subjects were English and Geography. "I didn't like math; I'm really dumb at it," she said. That said, she continued to score in the top 20 students of her grade and always made the honor roll.

The teenage rebel in Keyoka won through for her twelfth grade, when she convinced her parents that she could attend MIHS again. "That wasn't probably the best decision, because the teachers were never there, but I really wanted to be with my friends. That year I started slacking off and by the middle of the year I didn't go to most of my classes." As a result, her parents were called to the principal's office. "I got a good spanking for that one," Keyoka said, "but I never cried; I was really pissed off."

The principal put Keyoka on probation for two weeks. "I wasn't allowed to go to

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school and I was grounded at home. It was horrible.” But the suspension had the desired affect: “I turned myself into a ‘good girl’ after that.”

Such a good girl, that she graduated in 1994 as an honor student.

For someone with such good grades, it was surprising that Keyoka failed to apply for any colleges overseas. “I was undecided about what I wanted to do,” she said, but with nothing else on the horizon, she applied for and was accepted at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). “I took Liberal Arts, but the problem was that college wasn’t any harder than high school. In fact, I did a chemistry class at CMI that covered the same stuff I’d already done.”

In 1995, Keyoka discovered she was pregnant. “I felt really bad about it,” she said. “I told my best friends, but I kept it a secret from my parents,” until, of course, there was no hiding her ballooning stomach. “Finally, my parents just asked me ‘okay, how far gone are you?’ But they were really supportive of me, despite everything.”

When she gave birth to Herisa, Keyoka only missed two weeks of college. “My Mom was always there to help me with the baby, either her or the father’s Mom. Plus my grandmother was wonderful.”

One day, when Herisa was still an infant, she went to dinner at the home of her friend Kino Kabua, whose father was the late President Amata Kabua. “I remember he was holding the baby when he started telling us about the fact that he was bringing USP (University of the South Pacific) to Majuro. He said we should go because it was a good school.”

Keyoka took the popular statesman’s advice and, in February of 1996, she started her Preliminary year at USP. “I could have gone straight into the Foundation year,” she said, “but I wanted to start at the beginning.” And was it different to CMI? “Oh, yes. At CMI you’d just go through the text books and answer the questions, but at USP you really had to do the research and then write up 1,500 word answers. There was much more work!”

About 30 students enrolled in that first year at USP, “but by the end of the year there were less than 20 of us left. I think the work was too much for them,” she said. “Then I moved on to Foundation year and it was even harder.” A major bonus for Keyoka was that after school she could visit her father, who was by then Chief Secretary, and use his computer and the Internet to do research. “I was a lot luckier than many of the students,” she said, “because then he even bought me a laptop.”

Much of the Foundation year is spent deciding on which college or university to go to after graduation. “I decided I wanted to go to New Zealand, because my friends, who had skipped the Preliminary year, had gone there.” So she applied for three universities and was accepted by all of them.

“At first, for some reason, I wanted to go to Auckland, but my Dad thought I’d be homesick and suggested I go to the University of Waikato to be with Kino and Debo-

rah (Barker). I agreed and moved into an apartment with them.” The move to a new country was tough on Keyoka. “It was really hard to leave Herisa behind,” she said. “For the first two or three months I was homesick. I’d wake up every morning and would cry. The other girls made sure I was never alone, that one of them would always be there. Eventually I told myself I had to stop being childish; I told myself that if I kept on being upset I won’t go anywhere.”

Being in a group of close friends also helped Keyoka’s studies. “They helped me with my assignments,” she said, explaining that she’d chosen to major in Geography with a minor in Anthropology. Background support was provided by weekly phone calls from her parents, who continued to encourage her. “They’d say, ‘Your daughter is waiting for you. If you succeed, she’ll have a bright future’.”

But Keyoka’s first year at Waikato proved to be a strain. “That first year I failed three classes out of eight. I felt really bad. I’d never failed before. This meant I had to repeat, so I ended up doing four years of ‘uni’ instead of just three.”

At first, Keyoka had a RMI scholarship to pay for her tuition and living costs, but then she and her friends heard about a New Zealand scholarship that offered more money. “We all applied for the NZ aid and got it. That made life a lot easier.”

In Keyoka’s second year, “I partied a lot, but by my third year I was working a lot harder and cutting out the partying.”

During her last year at Waikato, in 2001, Keyoka realized she was yet again pregnant. “I decided that I wouldn’t tell anyone about the baby,” she said. “I didn’t want to worry my parents or my friends, so I just kept it a secret. It wasn’t a big deal at the university, there were lots of other moms, so that wasn’t an issue. The scholarship office even gave me a mid-wife!” Those months must have been hard for Keyoka, keeping a secret that she’d love to share. “It was difficult, but I had a lot of hope it would all work out.

“In fact, when I gave birth, I looked over at her and just said the word ‘faith’, so that’s what I named her: Faith.”

Keyoka finished her studies in October and flew home with a girlfriend. “Yoko (Lokboj) was holding the baby when we walked into the airport. “My Dad looked at her, then at the baby, then at me and said: ‘You guys are not being funny.’” And with that Keyoka gave a big laugh.

“I pulled out Faith’s passport and showed it to them. Dad took the baby to the car and my Mom started crying. I rode back to the house in Kino’s car...” And then she

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was home again with her two children and forgiving parents who were proud that their daughter had graduated with a Bachelor's degree.

The next step was for Keyoka to find a job and put her studies to work. "I really thought I wanted to work at EPPSO (Economic Policy Planning and Statistics Office), because I'd done a lot of statistics in college, or at the Weather Station. But at that time Marie Maddison was Secretary of Foreign Affairs and she told my Dad she'd like to interview me. "I met her at Dar Café and she offered me an internship, so I started working for the US Affairs section of Foreign Affairs. It was hard at first, but because I'm not shy I'd ask if I needed to know how to do something."

Later, Keyoka was promoted to be the Assistant Secretary for Asia-Pacific Affairs. "That job was great because it meant I traveled once or twice a month." A few months ago, Keyoka was moved to the US Affairs desk.

And what's in store for Keyoka? "I started to do my Master's degree in political science in 2008," she said. "After that I may run for a Senate seat. A lot of people have told me I should run for office. You know, when I listen to the Nitijela (parliament) I get really mad. We should have more women in power; the politicians should be younger. It's time for the next generation to step in: The current politicians seem to base most things on tradition and custom and they don't seem to see the need for changes to laws such as sexual harassment."

Knowing her determination and people skills, one can only assume that if Keyoka switched from Foreign Affairs to local politics, the big winners would be the people of the Marshall Islands.