

A woman with glasses, wearing a blue short-sleeved top with black lace detailing at the neckline and hem, and a black knee-length skirt, stands in an office. She is smiling and has her right hand resting on a desk. The desk is cluttered with papers, a computer monitor, a keyboard, and a telephone. Behind her is a large wooden bookshelf filled with numerous stacks of papers and books. A black jacket hangs on a hanger in the background. To her right is a black office chair.

**KINO KABUA**  
**Ministry of**  
**Foreign Affairs**  
**Alumni of the**  
**University**  
**of the South**  
**Pacific**



**KINO KABUA**

# Doing the best she can

## EDUCATION

### Elementary

**1981:** Assumption kindergarten, Majuro Marshall Islands

**1982-1985:** George Seitz Elementary School, Kwajalein, Marshall Islands

**1986-1990:** Majuro Cooperative School, Marshall Islands

### Secondary

**1990-1994:** Marshall Islands High School

### Tertiary

**1994:** College of the Marshall Islands

**1996:** University of the South Pacific (Foundation Studies Program), Marshall Islands

**1997-1999:** University of Waikato, New Zealand (Bachelor of Social Science)



Growing up bathed in the brilliant light of a loved traditional leader and President of the Marshall Islands was a charmed life for the now Secretary of Foreign Affairs Kino Kabua, but her position definitely had its challenges: “Being the granddaughter of Amata (Kabua), many times I felt I had to be perfect; to always do my best and be well-mannered.”

Kino is the eldest daughter of Jiba Kabua, Amata’s eldest son, and while she is certainly a member of the Marshall Islands elite, she wasn’t a pampered princess in a fairy tale castle. “My siblings and I were taught to be humble and mind our manners and to always do our best in school. We were always reminded to finish school and college first and to give back to our country with the knowledge we gained.”

Sitting on a couch in her slightly shabby office on the third floor of the Capital Building, the wind whistling through the window frames, Kino happily recalled her

early childhood, much of which was spent playing with her cousins in the presidential compound. “We lived in our grandparents’ old house, but I often slept over with my cousins. In those days we all mainly spoke Marshallese, which was also the case when I went to kindergarten at Assumption,” she said.

“But then my father was sent to Kwajalein to be the liaison officer between the (US) military and the RMI government, so that’s where I started speaking English. I picked it up quickly, because I was very young.”

Kino attended George Seitz Elementary from 1982 to 1985 and her English skills were quickly honed because at that time the Kabuas were the only Marshallese residing on Kwajalein’s missile base. “At first it was scary going to school with only American students and no other Marshallese and to suddenly speak another language, but I got over that.

“I loved going to school and I was a good student. My parents and my grandparents valued education.”

Returning to Majuro in 1986, Kino’s parents signed her up at Majuro Cooperative School (Coop), where she was given the usual entrance exam. “The principal said to my Mom that I had done well on the test, so they pushed me up to fourth grade, skipping third. Then, after, fourth grade, they jumped me up again to sixth grade, along with my cousin Ellen Milne.”

We were (and still are) best friends so it was an exciting event jumping grades together. We joined Suzanne Murphy and Deborah Barker in sixth grade.

During elementary school, Kino was an avid reader. “We had tons of books at home, but at Coop they’d also hand round this book catalogue once a month. I was into Nancy Drew and The Babysitters Club; books like that.”

While her family often talked about the importance of education to Kino and her six siblings, she didn’t have to be pushed into doing her homework or getting up in time for school. “Every now and again, we’d get the same lecture using the phrase ‘kate eok jikuul im kamoj am college’ ... ‘do your best in school and finish college,’” she said. This lecture was delivered by her parents and her aunts and uncles, but mostly from her grandparents.

Then it was time to move onto high School. “I went to MIHS (Marshall Islands High School) and I was very nervous on my first day. It was such a huge campus.” She was placed in the A division but was aware that her schooling in English had helped her reached this top drawer group. “I was aware of students who were struggling simply because their command of the English language was poor. It made me thankful that

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my parents had invested in our education (my sisters and I) by putting us in the best elementary school: Coop."

As the eldest of seven children, did Kino spend much time helping her younger sisters and brothers? "Oh no, all of us did our homework on our own. Of course we'd ask our parents if we needed help, but my siblings were also good students."

Kino's father, Jiba, attended the University of Hilo for three years, studying English. "He was one year shy from finishing his BA program," and then she added respectfully, "but nevertheless my dad's a brilliant person!" Her mother, Anita, went back to school after having seven children and did two years of college at Heald College in Honolulu attaining an A.S. in Legal Administration. "She's such a great role model to me. I never thought she'd go back to school after all these years."

Kino's high school years were fun. "I had lots of girlfriends, but with boys I was pretty shy," she said. Meanwhile "some of my friends were into serious relationships and when we graduated, two of my best friends were pregnant."

It appears that hitting the books was the theme of Kino's childhood, but she laughed when I pointed it out: "I did other things and, while I wasn't really into sports, I loved to play tennis. In my elementary years and into high school I played tennis almost every evening. It was my game and still is."

Kino, who had always been an honor student, graduated from MIHS in 1994 and went on to the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I opted for a Liberal Arts degree," she said. "While at MIHS I figured I'd do my two years at CMI and then go to college in the States."

But that's not what eventuated: "I did two semesters at CMI when my father pulled me aside one day and said: 'Okay, Kino, your grandfather wants you to transfer to USP (University of the South Pacific).' At that time he (Amata) was starting to establish a connection down south. He was also Vice Chancellor of USP at that time. I believe he saw the need to bring in a different type of institution to RMI and to provide other options for tertiary education for Marshallese students. So he was keen that I attended the new program."

Following her grandfather's request, Kino thought automatically "I have to do this." So she switched to the newer academy and was glad she did. "USP I found more challenging. There was a lot more comprehensive reading and we had to analyze the texts we read. I thought, 'wow!' this is surprisingly tougher."

About 20 students joined her at the RMI USP program. "I think it's usual that a number drop out and I seem to remember that less than 10 actually finished the year." Some of these successful students were Yolanda Lodge, Melvin Narruhn, Daisy Pedro, and Carlo Gordon.

One of the most interesting factors for Kino was that most of the USP teachers were Pacific islanders and the curriculum referred and used Pacific Island nations as

examples. “When I attended MIHS and CMI later, topics such as History of Pacific Politics was not in the curriculum. In twelfth grade I learned about the US Government, but frankly I don’t think I remembered much of it after graduating. There should be more classes on the Pacific, such as history, geography, sociology, etc. I know that for me, learning about the Pacific region was something new and different; it instilled in me a new pride in being an islander and it made the learning more fun and interesting.”

The school day at USP went from 8am to 3pm, “and every day I’d do about two to three hours of homework either at the campus or at home.” At that stage, 1995, USP’s library was relatively limited, so she would also often be found doing research at CMI’s larger library (“I still had my library card from before”).

Like all the students that year at USP, Kino was thinking of her academic future and decided that having moved into the British system of education, “it was only logical to continue that way.”

A friend of hers, Deborah Barker (the general manager of RMI’s Environmental Protection Authority and also a graduate of USP), was attending university in New Zealand. “I thought I wanted to go to either New Zealand or Australia,” Kino said. “I wasn’t so keen on Fiji, because I was interested in going somewhere more metropolitan but still in the Pacific region.

“I remember talking to my friend Yolanda (Lodge) and we said to each other, why not go to Waikato with Deborah. We agreed and worked on our applications together. The difficult part of that is making sure you have all the relevant documents.”

And the right travel permits! “It was a bit crazy because my dad worked at Foreign Affairs and it never occurred to me to ask him about how to process my visa into New Zealand. I think I was overly excited about leaving for overseas and my common sense went out the window,” Kino stated as she chuckled.

“Yolanda and I had a friend who had gotten her New Zealand visa in California, so we did that too, but that turned out to be the wrong way to do it because it took much longer.”

She laughed then, saying: “My Dad told me over the phone while I was in Honolulu, waiting for almost a month, that the NZ embassy accredited to the RMI was based in Kiribati and we could have processed our visas there. Sigh!” That was Kino’s first experience in applying for a visa to another country.

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She successfully broke through the red tape and arrived at the University of Waikato in February of 1997. "This was the first time I'd ever been away from my family. Yolanda was crying all over the place, but I was bouncing up and down. And when we landed I couldn't believe I was there; I was so happy, despite the chilly atmosphere."

At this point, Kino had yet to decide on her majors at university. "I went to registration and ended up sitting with a teacher from the school as I filled out the forms. He asked me what I wanted to study and I just looked up at him and couldn't really respond because I was still unsure.

"He asked me what kind of subjects I liked and what I wanted to do, so I told him I wanted to come back and work for my government. When I said that, he suggested I do public policy and also gave me the suggestion to do a double major, the other one being sociology.

"I knew that doing double majors would be a lot more work, but I felt like 'here I am, finally at university, and I'm feeling great about it. And this stranger was helping me make my decisions on my future.'" With this she laughed, but moved on quickly to say that she ended up enjoying both her majors.

Financially, though, she wasn't doing quite as well as she was at her studies. "The first semester we (Kino Kabua and Yolanda) ran into financial problems, so instead of living in the dorm, we squeezed in with Deb in her one-bedroom apartment." While that was cheaper, she still occasionally rang her parents asking for money: "I felt a little bit bad about it, but, you know, they're my parents..."

The three girls chipped in money each week for groceries, because eating in restaurants was out of the question. In her second year, Kino switched to a 'richer' NZ scholarship because she always felt guilty calling home for money and her parents still had her 6 siblings to put through school. After being awarded the NZ scholarship, all her financial problems went out the window, and the trio moved into a bigger apartment.

One of the first things Kino realized about being at university was organizing your time. "Time management was something we had to learn," she said, "especially getting assignments in on time. I did always get them done on time, but often this meant sitting up all night, sometimes until 7am, to get them done. For some reason I worked better under pressure. Then I'd walk groggily over to campus and submit my assignments."

As the end of 1999 and Kino's graduation grew nearer, her thoughts turned to what she would do in 'the real world'. "During high school, my dad was at Foreign Affairs and he was always traveling and I thought that would be neat. So when I came back to Majuro in November of 1999 I was excited to find out that they had an internship program available at Foreign Affairs."

Kino applied at the ministry and was interviewed by the then Secretary, Marie

Maddison. "The next thing I knew, they took me on. I started the day after New Year's and was on internship until October." Her compensation was paid for by the US Department of the Interior: "Foreign Affairs submitted a proposal to DOI to hire interns at MOFA," she explained. During her internship that year, Kino had the opportunity to visit New York. "I went to our UN (United Nations) mission for about a month. The UN is a world of its own," she said enthusiastically. "It was such a great learning experience."

Back home in Majuro, her elder colleagues were assuming she would want to stay on in New York if the opportunity arose. "But I wanted to be home after being away a couple of years, so Marie asked if I'd like to continue on at the ministry," to which she agreed with enthusiasm.

Her first job was as a Foreign Service Officer beginning in October 2000. "We helped the Undersecretaries do policy research and analysis on political, social, security and trade investment issues that affected the RMI. This included drafting briefing papers for the Secretary, and doing day to day correspondences with our bilateral partners and the regional/international organizations we are members of." In 2002, Kino was made Undersecretary.

In mid-2008, Kino had the honor of being promoted to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, having worked under a number of Ministers over the years: "Alvin Jacklick, Gerald Zackios, Tony deBrum, and now John Silk. Each one has their own unique personality."

"I love meeting people from around the world and building networks, and exposing the RMI (our goals and challenges) through our representation at meetings and conferences" she said. "On the average I travel about four to five times a year to regional and international meetings." Obviously so happy in her career, is this all Kino wants in life? "No. I have always wanted to pursue my master's degree and I think I've put it aside long enough. I looked at the contents of various courses at USP and recently applied for the Masters of Business Administration program at the USP extension center here in Majuro. I think the course's objectives are relevant because it will build my capacity and instill some new knowledge as a manager."

As she awaits news of the MBA at USP, Kino is acting as a mentor to one of MIHS' senior students, who is currently trying to decide on her own academic path. "I'm working with Tracy Oliver in the mentor program, which, by the way is a great program. I meet with Tracy every two weeks and we talk about her preparations for college (such as the TOEFL test, college applications, and scholarship possibilities), and I try and give her the best advice from my experiences. She is a bright girl and I want to help guide Tracy in her path towards college and finishing it."

"And, of course, I've been talking to her about the advantages of USP. It's now one of her three top options!"

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,  
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