

LAURENCE EDWARDS

A world of knowledge



It was early on New Year's Eve and the last of the afternoon's sun was warming the Marshallese and Americans enjoying a drink at Robert Reimers Enterprises Shoreline area.

Sitting underneath one of the mushroom-shaped, thatched tables was a trio of University of South Pacific (USP) graduates including Public Work's William Reiher and the Environmental Protection Authority's Moriana Phillips.

"Hey guys, happy new year! How's it going?"

"It's going great," a smiley Moriana said, handing over a camera so she could have a last 2009 snap of herself with her buddies. During the ensuing chat, mention was made of the series of academic profiles being written about

EDUCATION

Elementary
1988: Majuro
Cooperative School,
Marshall Islands
1989-1991: Yat-Sen
Primary School, Suva,
Fiji

1992-1993:

International School of Beijing, People's Republic of China 1994-1995: Pelham Elementary School, New York, United States

Secondary 1995-1998: Albert Leonard Middle School, New Rochelle, United States 1998-2002: Assump-

tion High School, Marshall Islands

Tertiary

2002—2003: RMI/USP Joint Education Project 2004-2007: University of the South Pacific, Emalus Campus School of Law, Bachelor of Law (LLB)
2008: Professional Diploma in Legal Practice (PDLP)

USP graduates ... "What about me?" the third member of their party immediately said.

"You went to USP?"

"Oh, yes," came the reply from Laurence Edwards II. "I studied in Vanuatu. Now I'm working at the AG's Office."

"Okay, see you at 8:30am on Monday."

The plan was to focus this particular profile on Laurence's time at USP's Emalus law campus in Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila. But the best made plans of mice, men and USP profilers don't always pan out, so instead here's a tale of a lad with Attention Deficiency Disorder (ADD) who was moved from school to school every few years, travelling the world while being told by teachers of many nationalities to: "Pay attention!"

Laurence Edwards, the son of Noland Edwards and Neiwe Lanwi-Kabua, was born on August 6, 1983 and took his first scholastic steps in kindergarten at Majuro Cooperative School (a.k.a. Coop, pronounced Co-op). "That was tough, because we only spoke Marshallese at home and Coop was all in English. Plus, I didn't really speak."

Excuse me? "I couldn't speak that well because I had ADD, which made me really hyperactive. I was very naughty and was always being a nuisance in class."

But Coop School was relieved of Laurence's minor disturbances after just a year when his grandparents, Laurence and Neijon Edwards, invited him to share their home in Suva, where his 'jimma' (grandfather) was the Republic of the Marshall Islands Ambassador to Fiji.

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"That was in 1989. My grandfather was Ambassador to Fiji from 1988 to 1991. I was so excited to go to Fiji and it was especially good because my elder sister Florence (who now works at the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority) was coming too."

Laurence attended the Yat-Sen Primary School in Suva for first and second grades. "I did a little better in school then; I was more settled," he said in the conference room of the RMI Attorney-General's Office. "But after two years there my grandfather was posted to Beijing, so after a short break home in Majuro, we flew to China. I went to the Beijing International School, where I found out my English was not that good, so they put me in a different type of class."

"A special ed class?"

"I guess it was a bit like special ed, but it was for kids who don't speak English well."

"ESL (English as a Second Language)?"

"Yes."

So the nine-year-old was coping with his third country and his third school. "It wasn't bad," Laurence said. "I was a little boy and very excited to be going to these different places." This latest school was huge: "It had one thousand, maybe two thousand students. And they came from all over: Europe, South Africa, South America, South-East Asia, Australian, New Zealand ... everywhere.

"Going to school with so many different nationalities showed me the big gap from where I'd come from. It was especially difficult to communicate, both in class and in the playground."

But his grandparents were always there to help him and listen to the tales of his day. "I'd come home and they'd ask me how my day had been; whether I'd behaved; what I'd learned. Some of the time I'd be teased by the other students because my behavior wasn't stable."

Fourth grade ended and it was time for another move, this time to New York in 1994. "My grandfather had been made the Ambassador to the UN (United Nations) and we lived in the suburbs outside New York. I went first to Pelham Elementary School in the suburbs outside New York and then to Albert Leonard Middle School in New Rochelle.

"I was the only Marshallese at the school and it was difficult for me to make new friends. It was always so hard to leave my old friends behind."

But again, when times were tough and he was still earning grades that just scraped the bottom of his classes, his grandparents would reassure him and remind him that he had to keep working hard at school, telling him that if he wanted to succeed in life, he had to be mature. "My grandparents were very keen on education. Laurence (his grandfather) was one of the first Marshallese graduates. He went to UH (University of Hilo) and then went on to get a degree in radio communication at Ellensburg Community College in Washington State. My grandmother also went to Ellensburg ... I think she got a degree in 'food and services'.

"My dad didn't graduate from high school, so I think that's why they wanted to take us (Laurence and his sister) in the right direction."

During all his years at school away from the Marshall Islands, he would come home to Majuro once a year for a vacation. "That was quite difficult for me because by then my Marshallese was no good and I didn't really understand the custom or

traditions. Custom is important because if a country has no custom, it's portrayed as a country that doesn't exist.

"Plus, I didn't have any friends in Majuro, except for relatives."

Back in America, his grades had improved "from near bottom to the near the middle. I was 15 years old when we left New York and it was sad knowing that we would have to move on again, but my grandfather had to retire."

So, in 1998, Laurence returned to Majuro and a school life at Assumption High School. A big grin and a hearty laugh described this latest scholastic change: "I went from the middle of the class (arm shooting upwards) right to the top!

"I was, like, wow! But the scope of the work wasn't what I'd expected. The stuff I was being taught at Assumption I'd

already learned in elementary school in America."

At this point, Laurence made the point that "of course English should be compulsory in the elementary schools here. I believe that MOE (Ministry of Education) should implement more programs for kids in English. They should get the right, qualified teachers in so the kids can do better and make the curriculum more advanced."

In 2002, in his senior year, he had no clear decisions for his future in mind. "After graduation, my dad wanted me to go live with him in Federal Way (near Seattle, Washington State) but I wanted to stay with my grandparents. I guess my choice then was CMI (College of the Marshall Islands), but my grandparents didn't want me to go there, so the other choice was USP."

So, part way through his twelfth grade at Assumption, Laurence signed up for the RMI USP Preliminary course.

"That was quite challenging," he said. "Basically the workload was more intensive and I had to really expand my vocabulary. But I was totally focused on doing well. I wanted to study as much as I could; I wanted to 'grasp everything'."

And he achieved his goal, proudly graduating from Assumption in 2002 and moving from USP's Preliminary year to its Foundation year.

A groan emits from Laurence at this point. "Then I did horrible," he ruefully said. "I was slacking off, coming to school late. I was in a relationship and all I wanted to do was get on with life. Quit school. Just move on.

"But my grandparents saw I was slacking off and they kept on giving me 'family chats,' but I'd ignore them. Then they told me I was going too fast, that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for me. They told me I had to work hard to succeed. But I

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just said 'screw the world,' not really realizing the impact of where I was headed."

Around this time he remembered his recent first job, which was working over

Christmas at Ace Hardware.

"It was all right," he said, "but the pay was \$1.50 an hour." He figured he could do better than that. Plus his girlfriend, who was also studying at USP, told him to focus more on his school work. "So after the first semester I started working harder."

During the second semester, USP students need to start making choices about what courses they would like to do at college. "I intended to study 'population and statistics' at USP in Fiji, but my teacher Tapu (Tapukitea Rokolekutu) said I was weak in math, while my strength was in English, so she suggested I would do well in law courses."

Laurence sent out two applications, one to do law in Vanuatu, the other to do a diploma in population and stats in Suva. At the end of his Foundation year, after RMI USP filed his test results, he found out he'd been accepted for both.

"I was still keen on going to Fiji, but that was partly because a lot of my friends were headed there, but in the end I chose Vanuatu because I thought of what Tapu had told me and I agreed that my math was weak."

Laurence was the only Marshallese student in the law class of 2004, "but there were three other Marshallese already there: Alonso Elbon, Dixie Lomae, and Bernard Adiniwin."

It was a difficult time for the young man as this was the first time he'd lived away from his grandparents.

"At first I was homesick, but I managed to get it together." The Emalus campus is also a relatively small one, with just 500 students or so. "I lived in the dorm for the first two years, which was good because you get to meet many people from all the Pacific island countries.

"The dorm is also a good environment in which to study: We'd get together for study groups or to study for the exams. Also, the library was just a block away and had all the resources we needed."

Laurence attended USP in Vanuatu on an RMI scholarship. "I think I got about \$6,000 a year, which isn't that much, especially as it's so expensive in Vanuatu; much more expensive than here.

"My grandmother helped me out a bit, but she'd always tell me to spend my money wisely."

But, here again loomed the word 'horrible.' "That first year of law was really horrible. I was slacking off again. I didn't know how to manage my time; I was missing classes. If I had a message for young people going off to college it would be to pre-

pare themselves before they go. Know that the lecturers won't come and find you; you've got to be attentive and take the initiative."

Laurence just, only just, squeaked through his first year of law. "The scholarship board put me on probation because of my bad scores. This meant that I had to pass the first semester of my second year ... or else."

That was the push he needed. "Probation made me pull up my socks. I slowed down with the parties and ended up doing really well."

In his third year in Port Vila, Laurence and another Marshallese guy, Mie Ishiguro, rented a studio apartment near the college and he learned how to cook "simple casseroles and basic stuff like that."

During his summer vacations, Laurence headed home to Majuro and interned at the AG's Office. "It was a lot better than Ace's \$1.50 an hour. I think I was getting \$4.50!" During his internships he worked closely with Assistant Attorney General Jack Jorbon: "I'd file Cabinet papers, take phone calls, and make appointments. The time here really convinced me that I wanted to be a lawyer."

In 2008, Laurence went to Suva to attend his graduation ceremony, alongside many other Marshallese. "That was the year Litokwa Tomeing (a former President of RMI) was involved with USP and was there to congratulate us all."

The following year, he studied for, and gained, a Professional Diploma in Legal Practice.

He came home in December and spotted an advertisement in the Marshall Islands Journal for two assistant Attorneys General. "I went down to PSC (Public Service Commission) and filled in the forms," he said. "But in the meantime, I worked on a volunteer basis at the AG's Office." In February he was chosen for the job and is now, amongst other things, preparing to take his bar exam at the High Court.

"I'd like to work here for another two years and then I'm hoping to do a master's degree in either Australia or Hawaii. "I'm still not tired of studying and increasing my knowledge. And if you do a master's degree you can specialize in particular areas. For example, here they need an expert in employment law. I may do something in the corporate field; perhaps to do with foreign companies and foreign trade investment."

'Foreign' is certainly a word that fits Laurence Edwards II's profile. He's very likely the Marshall Islands most traveled student, having lived in two rich hearts of Melanesia and the exotic busy-ness of China. If he realizes his new dream, when the world comes knocking at RMI's financial door, Laurence will be well-placed to help them over the legal hurdles with a smile and a 'Yokwe,' 'Bula,' 'Ni hao,' or 'Halo.'

Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw, Majuro, Marshall Islands, Jsnuary, 2010