



MELVIN NARRUHN
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MELVIN CHARLES NARRUHN

A Maverick on the Move

EDUCATION

Kindergarten

1976: Majuro
Cooperative School

Elementary

1977-1985: Assump-
tion Elementary
School, Marshall
Islands

High School

1985-1989: Xavier
High School, Federated
States of Micronesia

Tertiary

1997-1998: University
of the South Pacific, Fiji
1999-2002: University
of the South Pacific,
Vanuatu (LLB)



“I’m a maverick,” Acting Attorney General Melvin Narruhn said with feeling, and then added, as if in explanation of the word, “I’m a cowboy.” According to the dictionary, a maverick is a person that is independent in thought and action, someone who resists adherence to a group and, after listening to the colorful Melvin for a while, you begin to agree.

After all, it takes a certain freedom of spirit to decide as a teen that you’re going to be a priest, then do a complete turnabout and become a generator mechanic in the US Army ... and then complete-

ly reinvent yourself again as a lawyer and take on one of the highest positions in a country's legal system.

Born on March 4, 1971 – “That makes me a Pisces,” he added helpfully – Melvin's first tip-toe into education was kindergarten at Majuro Cooperative School, “but then I went to Assumption for first to eighth grades. I did okay in school, partly because my parents (Tommy and Daisy deBrum) pushed me in their own Marshallese way.” This, he explained, meant that while they supported him in his schooling, “there was no pressure for me to have to go to college in the Western way.” As a result he says his grades “came and went like the El Nino.”

After elementary school, Melvin chose to attend Xavier High School in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia. “My Dad graduated from Xavier 20 years earlier, in 1969,” he said. “I wanted to follow in his footsteps.” But his first taste of being in school in another country wasn't quite what he expected. “I was 14 then and I felt very Marshallese and very different from my classmates. There were Palauans, Chuukese, and other islanders and I'd get into fights all the time. I'd win some ... and lose some. That first year was a big time of adjustment for me.”

Stating that he's very much a product of the Jesuit's education system, he said that in elementary school “you knew each day what subjects you were going to do, but at Xavier there was a lot more variety. I also admired my teachers; they would always leave you wanting more and then leave you to go look for it.”

Melvin's best subject was religion, partly leading him to his deci-

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sion to join the priesthood. “Fr. Tom Marciniak, S.J., spoke to me a lot about the fact that there’s another way of life to being a husband or a lawyer, that there could be a vocation for me. He planted that seed in me.”

In his later teens, Melvin said he became the ‘Beemock.’ Excuse me? “Big Man On Campus,” he explained slowly, as if talking to the mentally challenged. Being the BMOC apparently left little time for such mundane things as filling out the required applications to colleges.

“Somehow I just didn’t get around to writing any applications. My thoughts were that I didn’t want to go where there were a lot of Marshallese, because I’d just spend the whole time partying.” But graduation was approaching and he had to do something after finishing high school.

“It was spring of 1989 when a group of US Army recruiters visited Xavier and after listening to them I thought to myself, ‘I haven’t written any college applications, what’s my excuse going to be to my parents?’” So he took the Army test, passed and signed up before his grandmother caught wind of his decision. “She would definitely have said no to me going into the Army,” he said.

Melvin did his basic training at Fort Dix in New Jersey. “Then I took the Advanced Individual Training course, and in that you could choose what you wanted to be trained as. My ASVAB score was high enough to train in practically any field I wanted, but I picked generator mechanic because it carried a bonus at the end of \$2,500. Plus after getting my ticket I could choose where in the world I wanted to work.”

He did his mechanics training in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and then ended up in Fort Hood, Texas, where he spent the last of his four years in the Army. During this time he’d been tossing around the idea of going to college, especially because, as part of the Army

package, the US government would pay about \$9,000 in college scholarship funds.

“Then, in my last year at Fort Hood, a group of guys accused me of breaking some generators. They said they had witnesses, but I knew I could rebut all the statements made against me. I was advised to get a lawyer, but I didn’t do that. Instead, I sat down and wrote a five- to six-page statement about what had happened.

“The Army never pursued the case and my success was the trigger that made me want to go to law school.”

The year was 1993 and Melvin figured he’d study at a college in the US the following year, using the Army funds. Instead, after returning to Majuro, he headed up to Likiep Atoll to build a house for his grandfather’s sister. “It’s the one that’s near the air terminal, the little white house,” he said, adding that he ended up staying on Likiep for a year.

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“When I got back to Majuro I needed money, so I started working for my uncle, Justin deBrum, who had the Lijemao construction company. I was a laborer, I did carpentry , then I was a painter and I was quite good at it.”

Six months passed and Melvin was still working with hammers and saws, when his first cousin Ellia Sablan suggested he join her at the new University of the South Pacific (USP) Center.

“I told her ‘let me think about it.’ I mean, I wasn’t sure if after all those years away I could go back to studying or that I wanted to.” But Ellia kept at him and eventually he enrolled in that first year of

the RMI-USP Project. “They called us Project X,” he smiled.

Melvin found the return to books in 1996 surprisingly interesting. “I was really into it,” he said. “I had to work at it, but I found it was pretty much smooth sailing.”

Still focused on getting a law degree, after finishing his Foundation year, he started learning the legal trade at USP’s Laucala Campus in Suva on an RMI Scholarship. “The first year we did all the basic stuff. What I really liked about USP was that you researched the topics using your own (Marshallese) law.”

He ended up staying at the Fiji campus for two years, which, apparently, had been a mistake. “I had one of my senior law lecturers in Suva saying I had to do a second year there, but when I got to Vanuatu, the late Professor Bob Hughes, Head of USP School of Law, said that second year in Suva hadn’t been necessary and that I should have contacted him. I was pretty annoyed about ‘wasting’ that year.”

In Suva he lived off-campus with his cousin Ellia and, with his scholarship and savings from his construction work, life was pretty good. But it was a relief when he finally made it to Vanuatu in 1999. “It’s a much smaller campus than the one in Suva,” he said. “I preferred it because it’s just a law school, so there isn’t the distraction of everything else.”

On his summer breaks back home in Majuro, at first Melvin interned at the RMI Legal Aid Office. “Later on I didn’t work in the summers. I let my mind rest,” he said.

The year 2002 saw him finally graduate with his Bachelor of Law (LLB). “At the time I couldn’t believe it. I thought ‘wow! I’ve finished law school.’”

On returning home, the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General took Melvin to lunch and asked him where he’d like to work. “I

told them I will work anywhere in the government that needs me most.”

Three weeks later he had a desk at the Attorney General’s office. “I love being a prosecutor,” he said. And will he be doing any further studies? “I’m considering doing my Masters of Law at the International Maritime Law Institute in Malta.”

Malta? Yes, well I suppose that would be the sort of unlikely destination that only a maverick would choose.

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
Majuro, Marshall Islands, September, 2009*