



**MORIANA PHILLIP, EPA
Alumni, University of the
South Pacific**



MORIANA PHILLIP

Making a World of Difference

EDUCATION

Elementary

1988: Head Start,
Marshall Islands

1989-1991:
Seventh Day Adventist
Elementary School,
Marshall Islands

1991-1997:
Delap Elementary
School, Marshall Is-
lands

Secondary

1997-1998: Marshall
Islands Middle School

1998-2002: Marshall
Islands High School

1999-2002: Upward
Bound, Marshall Islands

2002: Calvary High
School, Marshall Is-
lands

Tertiary

2003-2004: University
of the South Pacific,
Marshall Islands

2005: University of the
South Pacific, Fiji

2006-2008: University
of the South Pacific,
Marshall Islands. BA

2009-?: University of
the South Pacific, Mar-
shall Islands. Master's
degree candidate



For many years, Moriana Phillip thought she'd like to go into medicine, perhaps become a doctor. But then her heart switched to healing of a different sort: Making the world better by working on its environmental problems.

As a teenager, she stopped mentally glamorizing hospital emergency rooms and instead eagerly lapped up anything to do with the environment, her talisman being one word: Greenpeace.

Born in 1983, her education started in 1988 at the small and colorful Head Start in Delap, where she began to learn her 'A, B, Cs'. "Even then I knew I was a pretty good student," Moriana said cheerfully, "because they picked me to make the end of year speech."

Certainly, a five-year-old speech-maker holds promise of bigger things to come ... and off went the eager tyke to preschool, kindergarten and first grade at Seventh Day Adventist Elementary School (SDA), also in Delap. And did she enjoy it? "I did not," Moriana said with vigor as she sat in her office in RMI's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). "I was bullied, perhaps because I was the only child with light skin," the latter being the result of her Marshallese and American parenthood. "Or maybe it was because I was always an attentive student and they thought I was a nerd."

No matter the reason, Moriana convinced her mother to send her to the nearby public school, Delap Elementary School (DES). And did she enjoy it? "I loved it! All my friends were there and it was fun."

Her elementary schooling at SDA had been in English, but at DES all the teachers were Marshallese and that was the language of education. "They taught all the classes in Marshallese, even the English lessons," Moriana said with clear annoyance. "I mean how can you teach English in Marshallese?" and instantly gave a multi-lingual description that surely would have left the brightest young students in confusion.

"We all speak Marshallese at home, but I really believe that teaching should be in English. How can you teach a book that's in English in another language?"

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Because of her background at SDA, where the majority of teachers are from off-island, language was not an issue for young Moriana and she sailed through to seventh grade, graduating from DES in 1997 and moving up to Majuro Middle School.

Things became a little tougher for the A-grade student at this point. “Our class sizes at DES were about 20 or so, and we all knew each other really well. Suddenly I was in a school with 40 kids in a class and they were from all over Majuro. Everyone was so much bigger, tougher and more competitive.

“There they sorted us into groups by color. I was in ‘red,’ the top academic group. The kids all seemed bigger, taller and tougher than me. But in high school, we all had a different attitude. The bullies of eighth grade disappeared; now it was all about academic standing, not networks.”

By this time, the formerly shy Moriana was in her element. “I guess I was popular,” she said, “because I was student body president in ninth, tenth and eleventh grades.”

So far, Moriana had enjoyed a dream run through school, including being a student in the elite Upward Bound program run out of the College of the Marshall Islands. (Upward Bound is an intensive after-school program to prepare students for college.) “UB was the best! I can honestly say that UB prepared me mentally and academically for ‘uni’ and I am forever grateful!”

Suddenly, however, there came a brutal awakening in twelfth grade, when she was 17. “It happened near the end of the year, just a few weeks before graduating. I was expelled for drinking. I went from being a candidate for the valedictorian seat to being expelled.

“I was punished too harshly and treated unfairly by the principal. When we were brought into her office, the principal told us all to stop making such a mess of her carpet with our crying.”

Moriana's mother, Lino Langidrik – a nurse at Majuro Hospital – was shocked on hearing the news. So was Moriana. "With my friends, we wrote a letter to Ministry of Education but we never heard anything of it.

"That whole period was a blur. It was a very difficult time for me." She ended up finishing her last few weeks of high school at Calvary in Delap. I still knew it was important to get a high school diploma, but yeah, was so close to giving up..."

Finally, the day of graduation arrived and Moriana was part of Calvary's class of 2002.

Luckily for her, however, there were people in the community that knew Moriana's worth and that, perhaps, she had been treated unfairly. "Shortly after graduating, I was asked to take part in a youth training workshop held by UNICEF (the United Nation's International Children's Emergency Fund) in Pohnpei."

This was a recovery period for her. "I realized that my behavior had been normal for a teenager. Plus it wasn't about giving up, but knowing that you can get back on your feet."

After the two-month course, she took up a part-time job at Gibson's store (now Payless). "I worked as a secretary for the general manager, Sam Smith," she said. "But I always had my mind on going to college. That was what I'd always been preparing for."

She successfully applied to do USP's Preliminary Program and then the Foundation Program in Majuro. "I had seen so many students come back from USP in Fiji with their degrees; it made me want to

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follow them to USP. I looked at the success rates of both USP and CMI (College of the Marshall Islands) and realized that more USP students were returning with degrees. There was Kino Kabua, Terry Keju, Yoko Lokboj, Deborah Barker, and more.”

It was during these two years that she switched her medical ambitions to the environment. “I developed a passion for the environment. I focused on the messages of ‘being nice to your environment,’ ‘save the planet.’ I would look up everything I could about the subject and about Greenpeace,” she said.

Supporting herself with her part-time job, Moriana’s first semester at USP “was a little shaky. But the second semester I improved and as I went through the program I worked harder and got better grades. What had happened in high school made me more determined; it showed me how important it was to get back on my feet.”

During her Foundation year, Moriana had the potential choice of going to college in New Zealand or Fiji, “but I felt Fiji was more similar to here, especially in environmental and social issues.” She was accepted for both a Republic of China scholarship to study at medical school and a New Zealand aid scholarship for environmental studies. She chose the latter and in January, 2005, she arrived at USP’s Laucala campus. “I remember being dropped off at the dorm by the Ambassador, Mack (Kamanaga), at 3am. I lugged my suitcases to my room, sat on the small little bed and cried until 6am. It was my birthday.”

At first Moriana remembers being scared she “wouldn’t be able to make it. I was in a ‘real’ university with thousands of other kids. I was far away from home, the furthest I’d ever been.” Helping her and many other islanders get through those first few weeks, before the main campus came to life in February, was a ‘bridging program’. “They introduced us to new formats for learning in the British system.”

Before long, Moriana found herself living happily in the USP dorm, surrounded by old and new friends, and studying at a whole new level. And did she enjoy it? “Oh yes! But I did horrible!

“Oh, I studied just enough to pass. But I was partying and enjoying myself way too much.” So, yet again, her first semester went badly. Remembering her recent history, she realized what she needed to do and started hitting the books. “In the second year I was doing better at school. Every Saturday and Sunday I’d hit library. I went from scary Cs to A-pluses.

“I remember overloading one semester to prove to myself I could do better and I ended up with three A+ and 1 A!”

Every November, during her three-year program, Moriana returned to Majuro and interned at either the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority or EPA. “They paid me a small amount. It was great experience.”

During her second year in University she was elected president for the Marshall Islands Students Association. “I, along with nine other students, launched the first ‘environmental youth group’ in the University. We called ourselves the ‘Econesian.’ The group is now one of the most successful and active youth groups in the Pacific. We have grown from 10 founders to hundreds of active members from all 12 Pacific Countries.”

Then her final day of college arrived and, like all graduates, that big day when they donned the “boring brown gowns” was a special one. But it was even more so for Moriana as the President of the Marshall Islands, Litokwa Tomeing, was at the campus on other

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business and took the time to shake her hand and congratulate her. "Imagine," Moriana breathed, "the President at my graduation!"

On arriving home she chose to work at EPA and was welcomed by General Manager John Bungitak. "I'm now the National Coordinator of the Ozone Unit. Under this we implement regulations on such things as biodegradable products and organize community awareness programs. I head the Ozone Task Force, which has representatives from MOE (Education), MOH (Health), Customs, R&D (Resources and Development), and Public Works."

The goal of removing all the Styrofoam from the Marshall Islands, or at least limiting it, would appear to be a big job. But Moriana still has time for further education. "I'm working on my master's degree in Environmental Science. I've passed one unit and now I hope to next year continue my studies at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. It should take me a year and a half to complete."

What's the motivation for Moriana to continue her studies? "I'm motivated by learning," she said simply. "But, yes, I'd love to run EPA one day."

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