

A woman with dark hair and glasses is smiling and standing next to a large, textured tree trunk. She is wearing a short-sleeved shirt with a vibrant pink and white floral and paisley pattern. Her right hand is resting on the tree trunk. The background shows some green foliage and a white structure.

**RIBECCA
DOMINGO**
Ministry of
Health
Alumni of the
University
of the South
Pacific



RIBECCA DOMINGO

Breaking out from a tough upbringing

EDUCATION

ELEMENTARY

1988: Seventh Day Adventist Elementary School, Marshall Islands
1989-1992: Assumption Elementary School, Marshall Islands
1993: St. Cecilia Elementary School, Chuuk State, Federated States of Micronesia
1993: Assumption Elementary School, Marshall Islands
1994: Sta Rita Elementary School, Philippines
1995-1997: Calvary Elementary School, Marshall Islands

SECONDARY

1997-2000: Marshall Islands High School
1998-2000: CMI-Upward Bound Program, Marshall Islands

TERTIARY

Summer 1999: California Lutheran University-UB Math-Science Program, US
2000-2001: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands
2002: University of the South Pacific, Fiji
2003: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands and College of the Marshall Islands
2004-2007: University of the South Pacific, Fiji
2008-?: RMI-USP, Marshall Islands
2010-?: USP, Marshall Islands, MBA contender



High school salutorian Rebecca Domingo's parents were her making and, for a short time, her undoing. Her strict home life included being dropped off and picked up from school, without fail, every weekday; it included doing her homework promptly on arriving home; it did not include much of a social life with her peers.

"After high school I felt like I had lost my teenage years," she said in her gaily-colored office at the Minis-

try of Health, and that led to her being rebellious at university. Ribbecca, born on April 13, 1984, has six older brothers and five older sisters. Her mother, Grace Timothy, is Marshallese, while her father, Robert Domingo is Filipino. "My Dad has lived in the Marshalls since the 1970s," she said, adding that the language used at home was mainly Marshallese.

"When I was four, I did pre-school at SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) and kindergarten and first and second grades at Assumption (Elementary School). Then, in 1993, my Dad moved us all to Chuuk (in the Federated States of Micronesia) so I went to St. Cecilia Elementary school, which is part of Xavier High on Weno Island."

The work opportunities in Chuuk didn't pan out for Robert, who owns Bingo Construction, "and it was very violent in Chuuk," so 1993 found her back at Assumption in third grade. "I was so into school," the Information Technology expert said. "I think that if people encouraged their kids to go to school early in life it would give them a better start in education. I know that once I started going to school I just couldn't stop. Even now I miss school."

Robert, who came from a poor family and had to leave school early to help his family on their farm, was very keen on making sure his children received a top-notch education: "He wanted something better for us, so in 1994 he decided to send us to the Philippines. We lived with my Dad's parents, but that was a little difficult because they didn't speak English." The teachers at Sta Rita Elementary School put her in fifth grade, instead of fourth, and she found the education was of a far higher standard than Assumption's. "There were more subjects, the teachers were better qualified and we spent longer hours at school, getting out each day at about four or five. There was also more homework."

But Ribbecca's parents missed their children, so after a year in the Philippines, Ribbecca was back in Majuro and attending Calvary Elementary School. "My mother also wanted something better for us. She went to Assumption and then MIHS (Marshall Islands High School), but she got pregnant in her senior year and dropped out of school. But," Ribbecca said proudly, "later on she went back to school to get her GED (General Equivalency Diploma) and with her first attempt, she passed. She wanted to go on to college, but Dad said 'that's enough'. She's really my inspiration."

Because her education in the Philippines was so good, the teachers at Calvary decided Ribbecca should skip sixth grade, so she fast tracked through seventh and eighth grades and then moved on to MIHS. "I was selected to do the Upward Bound (UB) program in ninth grade, but my parents did not allow me to attend since it involved

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staying after school, from four to five pm. The following year, my sister was selected to attend, so my parents became confident enough to allow me.”

Having skipped two grades, Ribbecca was younger than her classmates, but did not find that a problem. “They didn’t treat me as younger than them.” A problem she did have, however, was that the English levels at Calvary had been poor: “This meant the first semester of high school was hard for me. I had to work harder on my schoolwork and I asked my Mom to get me books at Gibson’s (supermarket). Reading is so important,” Ribbecca said with emphasis. “When I didn’t have any books, my Mom and I would read the Bible together. We had an English version (of the Bible) and a Marshallese version, which helped me to learn my own language better.”

After struggling through her early days at MIHS, she managed to pull herself up to the top group of her year. “I was on the honor roll all through high school,” she said.

So, academically, she was doing well, “but my parents were really strict. I wasn’t even allowed to take part in the talents shows. It was sad for me. Every day I was picked up from school, taken to UB, and from there, straight home.” Presumably this rigid lifestyle did have the bonus that she studied hard at home and earned the top scores in her final year, supposedly making her valedictorian, but she was deprived of the title by the Vice Principal, who at the time favored another student. Even Masilina Sefeti, Principal of the RMI-USP Joint, recommended her to be the valedictorian, especially because she had done her preliminary year with flying colors, making her “top of the lot.”

On top of her USP studies, Ribbecca did extra curriculum activities at the Upward Bound Program. “I didn’t want to start any disputes, so I settled for salutorian.”

“After high school I wanted to go to college in Hilo (Hawaii). But my friend Chinilla (Pedro) changed my mind. Her Dad was in politics and he was keen for students to go to USP (University of the South Pacific). She was going, so I decided to go to USP too.”

Immediately on starting the Preliminary year Ribbecca she saw a big difference in the style of teaching. “At high school they split you into groups, so I was in the college prep stream, presumably the highest level. But at USP everyone is equal and it doesn’t matter where you come from. I think in high school they shouldn’t put all the top kids together ... they should mix everyone up, so that the slower ones are pushed harder. If you’re not pushed to aim high, they won’t try.

“USP was a big challenge. At high school I was pretty relaxed with my studies, but at USP it was way stricter and there was much more work. The exams were harder, there were more essays to write, more research to do. It’s what high school is supposed to be like! Plus, the quality of the teachers was better.”

Forty or so students joined Ribbecca in the Preliminary year, which sees students finish their twelfth grade at the college. “But it seemed that every day or week the number went down. So many of the kids just gave up, when instead of slacking off they should have finished the program. Anyway, by the end of the year there were only about 10 of us left. Some of them went to CMI (College of the Marshall Islands) and some got jobs, but it was a shame they didn’t stick with it.”

Ribbecca loved USP, but for reasons she wasn't quite clear on, decided that instead of going on to USP's Foundation year, she would try CMI. "But by then I was asking myself 'where's my teenage life? Where did that go?' All of a sudden I was going against my parents. I was feeling like I'd missed out on my social life."

She stopped hanging out with her studious pals and became buddies with a new crowd; a rebellious crowd. "At CMI I did business courses, with a focus on accounting. But I started being late for classes or I wouldn't show up at all and just go 'jambo' (cruising). CMI was too easy and the fact that I wasn't challenged didn't help."

Before long, however, Ribbecca realized that what she was doing was a mistake. "I wanted to go back to USP, so I signed up for the Preliminary course again. But my counselor and accounting instructor Vimlesh Narayan asked me what I was doing in that class. I explained that I felt I should finish the Preliminary year (half of which she'd missed by going to CMI)." Then, laughing, she added: "Mr Narayan said to me that I had straight 'As' and what did I want? A-plus-pluses?"

So into Foundation year she went. "I did okay, not great, but okay."

Much of that year was spent thinking about where she would go on to college. "I wanted to go to New Zealand, mainly because my brother, who'd also done USP, was studying in New Zealand. I applied for New Zealand aid, but that year it was decided that all the USP students would be diverted to USP in Fiji."

Ribbecca was disappointed about the decision, but nevertheless decided to give it a go. "But there were some hold-ups between NZaid and the RMI scholarship office and I ended up getting to Fiji three weeks late. They didn't even have any room left in the dorm and I missed out on enrolment week, where everything is explained to you."

Annoyed with her lot, Ribbecca said that she and a number of other Marshallese students were taken in by the RMI Embassy in Suva. "Then they moved us to a Catholic sisters' hostel. It had strict rules ... it was just like living at home.

"We had to be in our rooms by ten o'clock, when they locked the gate. If you missed ten o'clock, you'd have to call up friends and see if you could stay with them for the night.

"If you did make it in time, lights had to be out at eleven, which meant I couldn't

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study late at night.” Rebecca’s accommodation issues were not her only problem. “I was enjoying my independence,” she said. “I’d skip class a lot and didn’t hand in my assignments.” At the end of the first semester, the former salutorian managed to pass only one of her four courses.

“That was the first time ever that I failed. It was like I didn’t care any more. I was enjoying life to the ‘max’ without even thinking about school.” Fortunately for Rebecca, NZaid gave her a second chance in her second semester, but still she didn’t have the right mindset. “Yet again I only passed one out of four and I was suspended and lost my NZaid scholarship.”

It was extremely hard for Rebecca to tell her parents she’d failed. “I think my Mom finally figured it out, especially when I didn’t make any plans to go back to Fiji.” To be able to return to USP, she was supposed to take a number of extension courses and then reapply.

“I started back at CMI in 2003 and also went back to USP. By that time I was undecided on what I wanted to study, but in the end I thought I’d try economics to see if I liked it.” And she did, ending up having a busy year studying at both campuses.

“I also applied for AusAID to go back to Fiji, having the RMI scholarship in mind as my last resort. I was really happy that I was successful, because the Australian scholarship was worth more money. I think the RMI scholarship gives students about \$120 a month, while the Australian one gives students about \$200 every fortnight.”

By now Rebecca’s social life had settled down and she could begin to see the shape of her future through the mist. “I applied to go back to USP in Fiji and was accepted. I did a double major: Management and Public Administration and Information Systems.”

This time around, Rebecca felt that she was starting with a clean slate. “I felt like this was supposed to be my first year of college. I had learned my lesson!”

For the next three years, there was no skipping classes or too much partying. She was focused and on track. “I stayed on campus for the first semester and then got an apartment with a couple of other Marshallese students. This works out cheaper than staying in the dorm.”

Rebecca came home in her vacations and the first year worked for her parents, mainly being the cashier at their small store. “Plus I’d do stuff like helping my Dad with filing his paperwork. But the next year I wanted to do an internship, so I approached NTC (the National Training Council) and asked them to find me a place to work.” Sadly this didn’t pan out for unknown reasons between NTC and NTA (National Telecommunications Authority), so she was back working for her parents.

“Then in my last summer I interned at MOH (the Ministry of Health) as an IT (Information Technology) specialist for the Health, Planning and Statistics Office.”

As happens so often, this first employment opportunity turned into a long-term job. "After I graduated they asked me to work full-time. There's just two of us at MOH doing IT, me and my boss. And I love it, even though I'm really busy. In fact it's amazing I had a chance to do this interview today because usually I'm all over the place fixing people's computers."

And that statement is a reflection of her tertiary education: At first she was 'all over the place,' but she managed to fix her problems, get back on track, and now lead a fulfilling career life.

But her education is certainly not over: Currently, she is doing part-time courses in accounting at the RMI-USP centre and is planning to attend the MBA program at RMI-USP, which starts in May.

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
Majuro, Marshall Islands, February, 2010*