



**VA SAVU
College of the
Marshall Islands
Alumni of the
University
of the South
Pacific**



Characteristics like the

VA SAVU

Determination wins the day



As the interview came to an end, Vasemaca 'Va' Savu turned to shut down her computer, closing the documents one by one, when a page appeared with the words Vanderbilt Peabody College at the top. "Oh, that's nothing," she said, waving her hand in dismissal. "It's not part of this."

On further questioning, however, it became very much a 'part of this.'

The college is where she's applying to do a 'Phd' in Education Policies and Management in Higher Education, an undertaking that will take at least four to five years. If she succeeds, she will become known as 'Dr. Va',

EDUCATION

Pre-school

1970-1971: Wright Place Center, Ratu Kadavulevu School, Tailevu Province, Fiji

Elementary

1972-1977: Namena District School, Fiji
Secondary

1978-1984: Adi Cakobau School, Fiji

1985: Laucala Bay Secondary School, Fiji

Tertiary

1986: University of the South Pacific, Foundation Program, Suva, Fiji

1987-1994: University of the South Pacific, Fiji, BA in Geography and History/Politics

2004-2006: Post graduate studies at the University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands

2006-2009: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands, Master's degree in Education

2010 - ?? Doctorate in Educational Policies and Management in Higher Education contender

a far stretch from the young girl who had to repeat her last year of high school three times before she could graduate.

Education has been at the center of Va's life from day one. "I was born in the school dispensary on October 23, 1965," the Fijian said. "My dad (Tevita Seru) was the engineer for Ratu Kadavulevu School in Lodoni, Tailevu Province, and my mum (Ana Seru) was a pre-school teacher there. It was a boarding school for boys and "I was posted back there to teach from 1990 – 1991."

Number six in a family of nine children, Va's real education began with two years of pre-school at the Wright Place Center followed by five years of elementary schooling at the Namena District School. "My brothers and sisters and our friends walked to school, which was about the same distance as going from Rita to Batkan." The children played a game to speed up their journey: "There were lamp posts along the road and we'd walk from one to the next, and then run to the one after that. We'd walk and run and it would take us about 30 minutes to get to school."

At the primary school level, Va was a fine student: "In our schooling system, the top three students, at the end of each school year were awarded with a prize during the prize-giving ceremony. From first to sixth grade, I only got the second prize once. All the other times, I was issued with the first place prize."

This didn't necessarily mean Va was always the perfect little girl. "Oh no, I'd get into trouble sometimes," she said in her office at the College of the Marshall Islands. "On our walk to school we'd sneak into a farm owned by an Indian and take -- well, steal -- some pamplemousse (grapefruit). Or we'd go swimming in the river, which we weren't supposed to do." Her punishment was weeding or, "yuck", cleaning the toilets.

Va's favorite subject at school was English, which she excelled at. "My mum used to read to us a lot at the school and we'd play-act the characters in the books. I loved reading and was into the Nancy Drew books and Enid Blyton." By the time Va reached third grade she was fluent in three languages: The national Fijian language called Bauan, her local village dialect, and English. "From grade three on, all our classes were in English," she said.

In 1977, Va graduated from elementary school and began boarding at the Adi Cakobau School in 1978, a government all-girls boarding school where English was also enforced. "The rule was that from 6am to 9pm there was no Fijian to be spoken, except for our Fijian culture and language classes." For this, Va is grateful. "My

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perception is that if parents want their children to speak a second language, they need to expose them to it very early in life. If they don't have that exposure by third grade it will always be difficult for them. It's a competitive world and they have to be equipped with excellent language skills to make it."

The elementary school honor student breezed through her first few years of high school. "I think boarding made it easier because everything at the school was scheduled. For example, each evening we had our 'prep' time after dinner; there was a set time to go to bed and to get up in the morning." There was time for fun too, as the government school had playing fields and even a swimming pool. "The Fiji government takes care of its students very well, because they want to produce results," she said.

After a few years, however, Va's results weren't as starry as they had been in elementary school. "I thought myself to be a brilliant student who didn't need to study. The wind had begun to change for me.

"My math skills were poor, which was a problem for me all the way through school. There was a point when my mum went to my math teacher and asked her to change my seating in the class ... I'd always sat right at the back and she moved me to the front, which helped my scores a lot."

In fifth form (the equivalent of 11th grade in the US system), Va passed the New Zealand School Certificate, "although I just squeezed through with 50 percent in math.

"Then in sixth form I was much too big headed. I thought I was good in math and had chosen to do all the science courses, such as physics, which I was lousy at. When I sat the New Zealand University Entrance Exam I flunked and had to repeat the following year."

Failure made Va work harder. "I just knew I couldn't be a failure," she said. "My parents were very supportive and paid the extra year of tuition." During that year, 1984, Va learned a very important lesson from her biology teacher. "I was president of the social committee and we'd just organized a social (dance). My mind was full of it when my teacher called me up to the blackboard to make a drawing of the human digestive system. I couldn't do it. My teacher said to me: 'Now look at you just looking like a fool. Why don't become the president of the digestive system!!'".

Mortified, Va realized she'd been focusing on the social side of things too much, so she knuckled down and hit the books. "But even so I didn't work hard enough and with math still being a big problem for me I flunked sixth form for the second time."

She very nearly gave up on education at the point, but "I remembered how well I'd done in elementary school, so I begged my parents to let me repeat sixth form again. They were worried that I would be embarrassed to do it, but in the end they supported me." Rather than repeat at the same school ("I'd be in a class with younger girls that I used to bully"), she switched to being a day student at Laucala Bay

Secondary School. "I lived with an uncle who lived near the school and that year I really worked hard. I finally passed the New Zealand University Entrance test ... and I passed it well."

Va's dream was to become a police woman: "I loved the idea of the uniform and being tough. If they'd allowed women to enlist in the army I'd have done that," she said. But the vice principal at the Ratu Kadavulevu School, where her parents still worked, had other ideas and convinced her to sign up for an agriculture and engineering course in 1986. "I didn't enjoy that at all," she laughed, adding "I quit after seven weeks."

And then a strange twist of fate stepped in to change Va's life. "I'd been accepted as a candidate for the police and had to go to Nausori for my second screening interview. I'd bought the paper that day and was reading it while I was waiting for the meeting when suddenly I saw my name included in the list of students being offered scholarships by the Fiji government to attend USP."

During the police interview, the head of the panel asked her what she would do if they didn't give her a job. "I told him that I had been accepted at USP and he said 'Forget about being in the police force! You go over to the university and sign up!'"

What made the whole thing particularly strange was that Va had never applied to go to university. "Anyway, I went to the Ministry of Education and picked up my scholarship offer letter and then went to the university to join the long queue of students registering. But at the Ministry of Education office, I was nervous as I thought perhaps there was another student with my name and maybe it wasn't me that had been accepted."

Finally, Va worked up the courage to talk to one of the workers, who looked up her registration number and told her she was the right person. "When I'd filled in my three career choices at school, I'd written police force as my first choice, doing quantity surveying at the technical college as second or doing teaching at Lautoka Teachers College as my final choice."

Va found out later that her school principal, an older cousin, had changed her career choices and included university. "Because he was a relation I wasn't angry at him and he after all was the person who had allowed me and given me the chance to do my sixth form and NZUE again for the third time."

So in 1986, Va did her Foundation year at USP, majoring in Social Sciences. "But I wasn't convinced that this was my future," she said. "I thought I'd do one year for

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the status and just to experience what university was like. Then, during that year, my sense of what I was doing totally changed. The depth of learning was so different from school and while I had to work hard, I decided to continue on and started my degree in 1987, the year of the coup.”

She’d signed up to major in English and Literature, “but after one semester I requested a change to Geography (because of the many excursions involved) and History Politics, with English as a minor subject. Then, on May 14, the coup happened and they shut the school.” Va and her friends continued to live at the dormitory during this period of unrest, with many of their islander peers being sent home to their respective countries. “When school reopened, they cut our vacation short, and we managed to squeeze the course material into that year.”

The next year found her doing part-time teaching. “The ‘brain drain’ following the coup meant many schools needed teachers, so USP students were offered part-time jobs,” she said. “I jumped at the opportunity, but it had a severe impact on my studies. There were all those geography excursions that I didn’t have time for, plus when I was teaching I felt like I was a baby-sitter to the students. I had no education strategy or skills.”

Va’s life also became more complicated “because by this time I had a boyfriend. It all added up to me flunking two courses in 1989. So I decided to take a break ... My boyfriend and I married – he was in the military based in Labasa -- and I was teaching at RKS (the school where I was born). I had given birth to my son then.”

A couple of years later, though, Va realized that she was so close to achieving her degree, it would be a shame to not continue, so in 1993 she went back to USP to finish her studies, graduating in 1994. “But I didn’t actually go to the ceremony, because I was in hospital having just given birth to my daughter.”

In 1995, the University of the South Pacific had advertised teaching positions for the RMI-USP Project that was to be established in Majuro in 1996. “I wrote in an application just to try out my luck. I was teaching at Ratu Sukuna Memorial School in Suva then. By then my mum together with my dad had left Fiji to take a job in the Marshall Islands in 1993 and my sister Jennifer followed her in 1995. One morning in March 1996, out of the blue, I received a phone call from the principal of MIHS (Marshall Islands High School) asking me if I’d like a job at the school.”

Her husband, Waisake, agreed to a change of location and Va and her family arrived in RMI in 1996. “I taught English at MIHS for five years. In 1997, while teaching at MIHS, I started working as a part time instructor at Upward Bound (an after-school program for top high school students to prepare them for college).”

Three years later, the ‘UB’ principal John Hunter suggested she take up a teaching job at the College of the Marshall Islands, “so I began the process of applying. I had my interview in January and was offered a job. But I had requested to stay on at MIHS to honor my contract, which was to expire in July. In May 2001, I received a termination letter from the ministry with no specific reasons cited. However, we

were later told that they had thought that we had both reached retirement age of 60. We were actually requested to return to teach at the high school, but I had already set my mind on working as a full time instructor at CMI by then." So, in 2001, Va started working at CMI in the Enrichment Program, which was below developmental level, and when that course was phased out, I switched to teaching developmental English."

In 2002, Va decided she wanted to do more studies and chose to do a certificate course in GIS (Geographical Information Systems) through the University of the South Pacific's Majuro campus. "I completed that in 2005. In 2004, however, I started to do my post-grad diploma in Education alongside my final courses in GIS. I was really only doing it out of interest," she said casually, "to keep myself busy as well as stay academically healthy. But this decision was a smart one, as just two years later, in 2006, CMI made it mandatory that all teachers hold a master's degree and the post-grad diploma course was a first necessary step to achieving this.

"In 2006, while I was studying at USP long-distance, I switched from the developmental education program to CMI's Education Department ... We teach the teachers." Her sister, Jennifer Seru, also decided to take her master's degree and the pair had three very busy years ahead of them. "About three times a week we'd get home from work, have dinner and take a bath and then we'd go to USP at about 9pm and work until 1am or 2:30am. It was tough juggling work, getting my kids to school, doing things for the community, and studying. I was a mother, a wife, a teacher, a student and a researcher all at once

But she made it, with the help of her buddy student sister Jennifer, her supportive husband, Waisake and her two children as well as her strong standing believer in education, her solid pillar, her mom, Mrs. Seru. So, in April 2009, Va flew back to her homeland for the graduation ceremony to receive her Master's in Education degree.

And now she's aiming even higher by studying with the Vanderbilt Peabody College, which is in Nashville, Tennessee. "I'm pursuing Educational Policies and Management in Higher education," she said as her teenage son Kitone, 19, walked into her CMI office. With a big smile for him, she added "it's going to take four or five years, but I'll try to get there."

My motto is "Once I've started, I need to finish. This is the driving thought that keeps me going."

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