

OF PUBLIC WORKS

Speaking of:

Slips, Trips & Falls

- Wear shoes with skid-resistant soles.
- Watch out for wet or slippery floor areas, especially when it rains.
- Walk slowly and pay attention.



WILLIAM REIHER
Ministry of
Public Works
Alumni, University
of the South Pacific



WILLIAM REIHER

Designing a Future

EDUCATION

Elementary

1986-1989:

Assumption
Elementary School,
Marshall Islands

1990-1993:

Lautoka Methodist
School, Fiji

Secondary

1994-1998: Natabua
High School, Fiji

Tertiary

1999-1999:

University of the
South Pacific,
Marshall Islands
(Foundation
Program)

2000-2004:

University of
Waikato, New
Zealand. BA

2008-2008:

University of the
South Pacific. MBA



William Reiher is the first and only Architectural graduate in Majuro, with the accent placed heavily on 'first' and 'only Marshallese.'

Not that William, 29, isn't proud of his chosen field of architecture: He is quietly proud, but it's just that somewhere on his long education path, he realized he didn't want to be just 'one more' anything.

The son of William and Marilyn Reiher, who live in Utidrikan village, Majuro, William began school at Assumption Elementary, quickly becoming an honor student who "enjoyed school very much," which was useful as his parents were extremely keen that

he and his seven siblings would all receive a top-notch education.

To help achieve that, when William was nine, his parents sent him and some of his sisters and a younger brother to live with his grandparents and an uncle in Lautoka on the western side of Viti Levu, Fiji.

His father believed that the British school system would be advantageous for his children: “Dad wanted us to get the best education we could, even if it meant sending us away. I was young, but I was very excited to be going down to Fiji and I had my siblings with me, so I wasn’t that nervous,” he said.

It took a short time for William to acclimatize to this new South Pacific country. “The accent was different and it took me a while to get used to it.” As luck would have it, though, his new neighbors were also Marshallese and their children helped the newcomers to settle in easily.

“We hung out together and studied together,” William said, explaining that to a large extent his Uncle Edward made a point of choosing who his nephew would befriend.

“He was really strict. He kind of chose our friends for us,” achieving that mostly by centering the children’s social life on the Northern Club, a middle-class social venue that organized events for youngsters. “It had a tennis court and a swimming pool and we’d hang out there on the weekends.”

As William spoke of his travels through elementary at Lautoka Methodist School and then on to Natabua High School, also in Lautoka, he danced lightly over his studies. He appeared to assume

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that ‘everyone knows that if you work hard and stay on an even keel, you will achieve your goals.’

In 1998, William graduated from Natabua High and returned to Majuro, signing up for USP’s one-year Foundation Program in 1999. “I felt that I had good enough grades to not need to go through the Preliminary program,” he said. At USP he chose to take Science courses: Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Math and English.

“When I started at USP I wanted to become a pilot. I had two Marshallese uncles who were pilots for AMI (Air Marshall Islands) and that sounded like an interesting job. But when I was filling out my scholarship forms I changed my mind. I wanted to be something different like no other Marshallese.”

His Uncle Edward was a civil engineer and during vacations as a senior student, William would go to work with him and do drawings and plans for him. “He kind of taught me, but I’d always done sketching as a leisure activity and been interested in drawing and design.” So design it was.

William was accepted for both an Australian scholarship to attend USP in Suva and a New Zealand scholarship. “I chose New Zealand because my grandparents loved it over there and went as often as possible. Also, I’d already studied in Fiji and I wanted to study in a developed country, which I felt would be more challenging.” Financed by a New Zealand Overseas Development Aid Scholarship, in 2000 he began studying at Victoria University in Wellington, the nation’s capital.

“I lived in the dorm and we (the other island students) were looked after by the International Students Center. They had a liaison officer who took care of us.”

The scholarship paid for tuition, books, the dorm, and gave students a stipend. “They really took good care of us,” William said.

“And I had enough money to go to the movies often and eat out all the time.”

He lived in the dorm for the first two years, but then moved into a five-bedroom house with friends, which “was much cheaper.” He and his friends were pretty much all good students. “We didn’t drink or smoke. I only had six to eight hours of academic work a day, so I had a lot of free time. I joined a music group, did activities with my church, and played touch rugby. I was pretty fit in those days,” he laughed.

For the first time in the interview, William admitted that he was struggling a bit at school. “That first year was the hardest. I guess it had something to do with getting used to the culture and the different type of schooling. I was trying to find friends and also find out about architecture at the same time.”

Things gradually sorted themselves out and he sailed through the next four academic years, graduating with honors at 24 with his Bachelor’s of Architecture degree in 2004.

“I got back to Majuro in January, 2005 and went to (the Ministry of) Public Works looking for a job. As an architect this was my only chance for a job other than PII (Pacific International, Inc.). I felt that a government job would have more stability,” he said.

So, qualifications in tow, he simply turned up on the Ministry’s doorstep and spoke to receptionist Netha Gideon. “I told her I’d just finished my studies in architecture.” Netha passed him on to the Public Works Secretary Smith Ysawa. “He said I should talk to Tony Tomlinson, who was leading the education and health construction

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projects. Tony worked for the New Zealand company Beca, which had the contract for the schools.”

That afternoon, William interviewed with Tony, an Englishman. “It went well and he said he was keen for me to come on board. He said he valued New Zealand’s education system as it followed the British system.”

A month later, William started work “on a promise” as the Public Service Commission reviewed his application. “During that time I had help from my cousin, Gerald Zackios, who was then Foreign Affairs Minister. He told me to just start work and that it would all work out.”

His title in his new job was Project Management Unit Architect, with the unit working on projects for the Ministries of Health and Education. Sadly, the designs for the outer island dispensaries and schools are “all pretty generic,” leaving him with little design challenges.

“Mostly I was making sure that the contractors got their work done on time and on budget. But I did get to go down to work at Beca in New Zealand for three months in 2006, which was great,” he said.

Slightly frustrated, William decided that as his role was more management than design based he needed more schooling in business affairs. “I applied for an RMI Scholarship to go to USP in Suva on a work leave basis.”

The scholarship only covered tuition and housing and William had to buy his own books and pay for his own living expenses, “which is why I needed to be on full pay.”

Despite being on a ‘good thing,’ he didn’t want to spend too much time down in Fiji. “I took 12 papers in 10 months ... it was

fast track,” he said. “It usually takes two years to do a Master of Business Administration, but I crammed it into one.”

He enjoyed his year at the big campus. “Thousands of people study there, but it’s a very open place. Lots of grass and park benches where you can sit and study. It’s a very good environment. Plus they have the fastest Internet in the South Pacific. “My course was easier than I expected. Business is mostly commonsense.” To prove his words, William received A grades in all of his 12 papers.

With his new skill, William returned to Public Works and is now project manager for a revamping of Majuro’s street lights, which are old-fashioned and costly for the Majuro Atoll Local Government.

“We will be replacing 500 lights in the denser population areas of Majuro with energy-efficient street lights. The project is in the evaluation of the bidding stage right now. It’s hoped the project will be finished by April 2010.”

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