



YOKO LOKBOJ
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alumni of
the University of the South Pacific

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Hard work pays off

EDUCATION

Elementary

1986-1987:

Kindergarten, Rong
Rong Elementary
School,
Marshall Islands

1987-1995: Majuro
Cooperative School,
Marshall Islands
(Salutatorian)

Secondary

1995-1999: Marshall
Islands High School
(Valedictorian)

1999-2000:

University of the South
Pacific Joint
Education Program,
Marshall Islands

Tertiary

2001-2003: Otago
University, New
Zealand,
BA in Geography



"I'm not the smart type. I'm the hard-working type," Yoko Lokboj said earnestly as she clasped her hands together on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' conference table. But if that statement is true, she must have worked extremely hard all through her years at school as she was the salutatorian (second highest scorer) of the Majuro Cooperative School's graduating class of 1995 and, even more impressive, valedictorian (highest scorer) of the Marshall Islands High School's graduating class of 1999.

The only child of Dunstan and Libetok Lokboj, Yoko was born on January 31, 1980 in Honolulu. "We lived in Batkan (Long Island), but I first went to school at Rong Rong Elementary School because I was living at that time with my grandparents."

Her grandfather is Reverend Jori Lokboj, long-time principal of the Marshalls Christian High School on the isolated north-western island of Majuro. "My grandparents taught me important family values and discipline," a fact she considers to be a

key part of her personality that has allowed her to succeed where others may have failed.

"After I finished kindergarten at Rong Rong, my parents brought me back to Batkan so that I could attend first grade at Coop school." Up to that point Yoko's home life and education had all been in Marshallese, but now she was faced with classes run in English. "Having lessons in English was strange, but I think I learned the language relatively easily."

Yoko describes herself as always having been "a good girl. I didn't get into trouble." She was also an avid reader, "especially in sixth and seventh grades when we did book reports. We had to read something from the media, such as the (Marshall Islands) Journal, and write a report every week," she said. "But my favorite subject was probably math because it was fun solving the problems."

On arriving home from Coop each afternoon, her first job was to do her homework. "Then I'd do my home chores, like sweeping up the breadfruit leaves, and only then did I go out and play. Actually," she added, laughing, "I also picked up the leaves when I got up at 6:30 in the morning."

Yoko breezed through to eighth grade and was class salutatorian, a role that made her mom extremely proud. Then it was onto the larger campus of Marshall Islands High School (MIHS). "It was so exciting joining the bigger kids." With her high grades, Yoko automatically was given a position in the 'A' group. "I'm sure I did better than some kids because my schooling was in English. I believe it should be the language of elementary schools, because it's the universal language."

Another point in her favor was that, at that time anyway, the top groups in each grade had the best teachers. "My teachers were mainly from Fiji," she said. "They were the best because they'd been recruited, so they had to have the right qualifications (unlike some of the Marshallese teachers)."

During her freshman year, Yoko was elected secretary and treasurer of the ninth grade student body. "As secretary-treasurer I would take the minutes of the meetings each month. I ended up keeping that role all through high school," she said. "I don't think anyone wanted to do the work of doing the minutes."

She also did the banking. "We were the only grade who managed over the years to save up enough money to pay for own graduation gowns, dinner, and all the other expenses. When we were freshmen, we had the idea that each student should donate \$1 a week towards the graduation fund, but we also raised money by hold-

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ing barbecues or doing car washes. The dollar idea didn't work very well and we dropped the scheme in 10th grade."

Still, being treasurer ensured that Yoko picked up new skills. "I opened an account at the Bank of Hawaii and continued to add student body money to it. I think we had more than \$1,000 by the time we graduated."

During one of Yoko's senior years, a representative from the University of the South Pacific (USP) visited the MIHS campus to talk about the benefits of studying under the British system. "I knew that Kino and Keyoka Kabua, who by then were at university, had already been through the RMI-USP program and they said it's a really good program; that it's more challenging than the American system."

Yoko likes a challenge, so she signed up for USP's Preliminary year half way through 1999. "I instantly found it was harder," she said. "At MIHS sometimes we'd have no homework to do, but every single day at USP there are assignments or little projects to do."

"Also, when I was in high school I wasn't really aware of the Pacific region, let alone the individual countries. USP opened my eyes to the outside world."

Then came the day she was back with her old friends from MIHS and on stage at the Education and Cultural Center (ECC) to give her valedictorian speech. "I remember being really excited, but scared too. There I was at the ECC gym and it was really packed. They were also playing the speeches on the radio, so it was a pretty big thing."

One of the aspects of the USP campus that Yoko enjoyed was the ability to use the college computers to go online. "Most of the research we had to do was on the Internet, and I didn't have a computer at home," she said.

Yoko moved up to the RMI-USP Foundation year in 2000. "That year was even harder," she said. "Especially as we were preparing for university and doing more assignments, more reading, and more class work than ever before." About 25 students had started at USP with Yoko, but now there were only about 18 students left in the program, giving teachers more one-on-one time with students.

"Then it came time to fill in applications for university. A lot of people applied to go to USP in Suva and a few for campuses in New Zealand. I chose to apply for the University of Otago, which is Dunedin (in New Zealand's South Island).

"I was the only student applying there, but I was glad of that as I'd heard that when there are lots of Marshallese at school there tends to be more partying and slacking off. Being my good-girl self I wanted to be alone. I was scared about that, but I figured it would be worth it."

Yoko only sent out only one application, but she felt confident because of her test scores. "I also applied for a New Zealand scholarship. Our teachers helped us get-

ting everything together, particularly my counselor Mr. Chand. I also looked at the campus on the internet and the courses they had.”

Next thing she knew, Yoko was on the plane and flying away from the only life she’d known. “I was more scared than ever. I’d never been out of the country. I’d always been with my parents and grandparents. There was nobody to look after me. Plus I had to fly to Guam and then to Fiji to get my New Zealand visa before I could go to Wellington. Oh, and for some reason, I had to overnight in Pohnpei. I just remember sitting in my hotel room and crying all night. I was still crying in Fiji!”

To make herself feel better, “I kept telling myself that ‘this will pass ... you can cry all you like, but it’s gonna pass’.” From Wellington, New Zealand’s capital, Yoko caught a connecting flight to Dunedin where a driver from the university was there to meet her. “There were 15 of us on the plane from all over: India, Asia, Arab countries, and a few Americans; but no Pacific islanders.”

Yoko remembers her arrival at the dormitory very well. “I had no warm clothes because, well, you can’t buy warm clothes on Majuro. I thought I’d do my shopping when I got there,” she said and then laughed. “I did take with me a blanket, because I figured that if nothing else, I could wrap that around me. Of course they had *douvets* (bed coverings) in the dorm.”

In New Zealand, dorms are called colleges. “My college was in the center of the college, which was huge. There were beautiful old buildings all around, with lots of clocks on tall towers ... Buildings like you see in the movies. I remember, too, that the air was cool and refreshing ... it smelt different.”

By her second semester, Yoko had made quite a few friends, some of whom lived in an apartment and they invited her to live with them. “There were two girls from New Zealand, my friend from Zambia, and a Samoan.”

Yoko did well in her first year. “At the beginning I had let myself know that there was going to be a big workload. I got myself prepared for what was coming. I tried to start my projects a month before they were due...” but here, for the first time in the interview, Yoko showed a chink in her academic armor.

“But then it always seemed that I’d be sitting up until midnight of the night before the assignment was due finishing it off.”

Her major was geography, with economics, sociology, and anthropology on the side. “I chose geography because all my life I was interested in my surroundings.

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I was the school environmentalist. I'd tell kids off for throwing their chewing gum paper on the ground."

While Yoko stuck to her hard-working motto, life wasn't all about studying. "My girlfriends and I would often go out to the pubs. I found that the scholarship money was enough to live on. I think I got about \$500 New Zealand a month." And twice, over summer, she returned to Majuro. "One year I worked at the reception desk of MIR (Marshall Islands Resort) and the next time I worked at EZ Price, because a friend of mine knew the owner, Neal (Skinner)."

In 2003, Yoko graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and she triumphantly returned home. "The first job I applied for was at OEPPC (Office of Environmental Planning and Policy Coordination)." Her application was successful and she became the Project Manager for Bio-safety, a United Nations funded project, which she held for two years.

"Then I applied for an opening at Foreign Affairs and became the RMI Desk Officer for Pacific Planning, which is funded by the Pacific Islands Forum. I did that from 2006 to 2007 and was then promoted to be a Foreign Service Officer for US affairs. I assist the Under Secretary for US Affairs, Keyoka Kabua. We provide policy advice to our Secretary (Kino Kabua) and to the Minister (John Silk). I'm also involved in corresponding with the RMI Embassy in Washington, DC, and communicating with the US Embassy here in Majuro."

Yoko states that she's not the smart-type, but this reporter would beg to differ. As she told her academic tale, she was quietly confident and obviously content with her diplomatic role for RMI. Add in her partner Chris Alberttar and their five-year-old son Lotijar, and it would seem that Yoko's plan to be hard working through school was indeed a smart move.