



YOLANDA LODGE-NED
Clerk of Cabinet
Alumni, University of
the South Pacific



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Read All About It

EDUCATION

Kindergarten

1980: Majuro Cooperative School

Elementary

1981: First Grade, Bellingham, Washington, US

1982-1983: Seventh Day Adventist's Elementary School, Delap, Marshall Islands

1984-1988: Majuro Cooperative School,

High School

1989-1990: Waller Jr. High 9, Enid, Oklahoma, US

1990-1992: Marshall Islands High School

Tertiary

1996: University of the South Pacific, Marshall Islands (Foundation)

1997-1999: University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand (Bachelor of Social Sciences)

2003: University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, Vanuatu

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



It took some time before Yolanda Lodge-Ned began to really enjoy her academic life. Was it in elementary school that she loved hitting the books? No. Was it high school that she found her studies mesmerizing? No.

Perhaps it was her Foundation year at the University of the South Pacific in Majuro that turned on her scholastic switch? Sorry, no again.

“I was in my third year at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, when I really started to

enjoy what I was studying. I loved the debates and the exchange of ideas with other students,” Yolanda said, having already described at length the fact that she has never been a model student.

Yolanda was born in Majuro in 1974 to parents who are life-long educators. “My mom, Frances Laninbit, was a teacher at Delap Elementary and then she was principal at Ajeltake Elementary for years. Obviously, she really wanted me to do well at school, but she was always having to force me to do my homework,” Yolanda laughed, something she does a lot, her big smile breaking into giggles as she recalls her school days.

She attended kindergarten at Majuro Cooperative School (Coop) and did first grade in Bellingham, Washington State, while her father, Kether Lodge, was going to university for a year. The family then returned to Majuro, where Yolanda was signed up at Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Elementary in Delap for her second and third grades of education.

“That school was good for my English, because all the lessons were taught in that language.” Then her mom switched her back to Coop for grades four to eight. “Coop was very different to SDA in terms of the level of studies,” she said. “I actually struggled quite a lot through fourth and fifth grades, but English was used in the classroom and out in the playground, which was a great foundation for me.”

That said, Yolanda does regret not having a better background in Marshallese. “I think there needs to be a balance between the languages in schools in the Marshall Islands,” she explained. “English is necessary, but there needs to be Marshallese in there too.”

One of Yolanda’s worst habits was to sit in class and dutifully copy

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down all the problems from the blackboard. "I'd just copy them down, saying to myself that I'd get to them later, but I never did. I was very good at copying ... but I often didn't understand a thing I was writing down."

To her advantage, however, was her love of books. "A teacher at Coop talked to my mom about establishing a positive habit that would help develop and strengthen my understanding of the English language.

She urged my mom to get me to read more, so one day she took me down to RRE Supermarket and told me to take my pick of the reading books. There were those Sweet Valley High teenage books. I read two or three and I was completely hooked. To this day, I always have a book in my bag."

After whizzing through elementary, enjoying her many friends, Yolanda then had a stroke of luck when her mother's cousin came to visit Majuro from Enid, Oklahoma. "She told my mom to send her kids to America, where the education was better." So in her thirteenth year, Yolanda flew to Enid for her freshman year.

"I was very excited; I'd begged my mom to let me go. It wasn't hard to assimilate (at Waller Jr. High), because Enid has a big Marshalllese community."

The biggest change for her in high school was going from six students in her class at Coop to the much larger classes with 30 or 40 students. "But the course work wasn't as hard as I'd thought it was going to be, mainly because of my good English from Coop. I even made the honor roll that year."

Still an avid reader, America was where Yolanda discovered the Harlequin series of romance novels. "I really increased my vocabulary reading those books," she said, giving an example of the word 'thigh.' "In one book there was the phrase 'His hand crept up her

thigh,' but I had no idea what a thigh was," and then she laughed again, saying she didn't use a dictionary much, but worked out what the words meant by their context in a sentence.

After a year, Yolanda's parents, who had another six children to rear, were struggling financially, so the teenager returned to Majuro and began attending Marshall Islands High School (MIHS).

"The school didn't have as many resources. The library wasn't as good, and nor were the text books. But I was in the top level of my year. Chemistry was the only subject I had trouble with and so I had to consciously make an effort to work harder to do well in that." The rest she appears to have just soaked in during class time.

She cruised through tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades and in 1992 Yolanda graduated from high school. "Straight after graduation I stood in a long, long line with about 50 people who were applying for three positions at V7AB." The then President Amata Kabua wanted to raise the profile of the government's national radio station and had organized for three new positions. "I got one of the jobs as a news and information producer," she said, adding "that was one of the most educational jobs of my life."

Speaking into a microphone wasn't a new sensation for Yolanda. "Rose Murphy was the producer of the MIHS radio show, which was on V7AB once a week for an hour. She would get me to read my poems on the air."

While at the radio station, Yolanda took part in a number of training workshops in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Japan. "They also, on a regular basis, brought in consultants to train us," she said. Also helping

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the reporting staff's skills was Fred Pedro, who worked with the President. "He'd come in and edit our stuff, showing us where we'd missed a part of a story and sending us out to fill in the gaps. "The rule of thumb for news reporting is be concise, precise, and to the point and when in doubt, leave it out." Pedro repeatedly drummed this into their training.

In early 1996, Fred suggested to Yolanda that she sign up for the new University of the South Pacific program, which was then called the RMI-USP Joint Educational Project. The RMI Government had decided to try something new with Marshallese students headed for tertiary level studies overseas, not only with a different curriculum and a different system, but to also have students return to serve the country after completing their tertiary education. In those days, only a minimum amount of scholarship recipients returned home to serve in their various fields of study, a situation that wasn't helping RMI. "Fred pushed me to start at USP, so I became a full-time student doing Social Sciences, and worked at the radio station part-time." This made for a full life, as Yolanda had a little son, Tyson, and a daughter, Zoya.

"When I first started at USP in their Foundation program I was kind of amazed about the realization that the Marshall Islands was actually part of the Pacific region, not America. Most of my elementary years -- and high school for that matter -- were spent studying the English language, the American history, the American form of government and so on. I could name the 50 states, but stumbled over how many atolls and islands were in the Marshall Islands and the name of each island. At USP, I learned about the beachcombers, the whalers, the traders, the explorers, the castaways, the missionaries and how these first visitors impacted the Marshall Islands, as well as the region."

Warming to the subject, Yolanda continued: "For the first time in my educational experience, I began to question my own country's history and its place in the region and the world. This gave me a

connection to my identity in a basic academic way, which opened and widened my perspective on life in general and where I was headed. The Lapita Pottery theory gave back to me what I didn't know I had lost until then: My sense of belonging to a group of people other than the foreign powers that shaped and molded my country's history. I was amazed to realize that there were places in the region that went through the same struggles as us."

During that first year of the RMI-USP project, about 100 students enrolled, "but people kept dropping out of the project," she said. "By the end of the year there were only seven or eight of us left and we were known as the guinea pigs of the project. A lot depended on our success or failure. There was Kino Kabua (now Secretary of Foreign Affairs), Melvin Naruhn, (Acting Attorney General), Benjamin Kiluwe (of the Public Defender's Office), William Gordon (the late Wagner Watak) and Baby (known as Leibebat)."

And did she work hard at USP? A big laugh and then: "No, I was a really slack student. I just don't study easily, plus I'd skip classes. I did that so much that when I did show up the teacher would say: 'Oh, welcome back Miss Lodge'."

During the latter part of the Foundation year, she and her friends were trying to work out which university they wanted to attend. "Kino Kabua and I had a friend, Deborah Barker, who was at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, and she recommended we go there."

Yolanda won an RMI Scholarship to attend the southern university. "Financially, that was really tough. We really didn't get enough money to live on, so we'd be always on the phone to the RMI Schol-

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arship Board asking for more or asking why the funds were late.” She and her friends had to learn how to budget. “That was the time of ‘namu-namu,” Yolanda giggled. “They were pancakes made of flour, sugar, and water and we ate them smothered with butter.”

After a semester living at the school’s dormitory, Yolanda teamed up with her friends to lease an apartment. “That was great,” she said. “Plus my friends really helped me... especially telling me to get up in the mornings, saying ‘you can’t sleep through the semester’.”

Yolanda’s major at Waikato was Public Policy and Public Administration. “I had really wanted to do Law, but I chickened out at the thought of how much work I’d have to do. If I did Law I’d be forced to study,” she said, throwing in yet another laugh. “My mom was so disappointed, because she’d always wanted me to be a lawyer.” She chose Public Policy because “when you’re growing up (in RMI) you see a lot of problems. People’s lives could really better. We could have better programs for retired people, perhaps a welfare system.”

The work at Waikato was not as tough as Yolanda had feared. “Amazingly, I took it in my stride. My first major assignment was in a women’s studies class and I wrote an essay on Mary Wollstonecraft, the first major feminist in history. “My assignment was given back to me a bit later than other students and I realized why when my course lecturer quizzed me on my educational background and where I had learned to write. She never said it, but I think she was a bit suspicious that an island girl could write so well. So much for feminist studies! But I got an A++ in that assignment.”

Yolanda said her greatest weakness was learning to balance her time, to not fall asleep in class, and to take proper notes. “Ironically, some of the classes I had the most difficulty in were my public admin courses. But then, in my third year, I really started to enjoy what I was studying. I loved the debates and exchanging ideas with the other students.”

During the last year, Yolanda and Kino were recognized for their scholastic efforts and put on the Dean's List, a news tidbit that received some print time in Majuro's local newspaper, the Marshall Islands Journal. Late in her first year at Waikato, Yolanda switched from an RMI Scholarship to one from the New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance program, which offered more money and made life a little easier. Each year, Yolanda returned home for the summer. "I mostly spent those holidays visiting family and friends and partying," she said. "But I did do a bit of helping out at the Pub or Ace's One Stop (a gas station), because the owner, the late Dorothy Doulatram, was a friend and mentor to me and she'd lend me money to help me in New Zealand." Always conscious of financial difficulties at home, Yolanda would ask her parents for support only as a last resort.

Finally, after three years, Yolanda earned her Bachelor of Social Sciences and flew triumphantly home to Majuro. "My mother and Kino's mom were there and tears of pride were in their eyes as they hugged and welcomed us home.

"There were also a couple of ministers at the airport when we landed," she said. "One was Wilfred Kendall, who was with MOE (Ministry of Education) and he told me to come see him." She was immediately hired to work at a media center based at MIHS, but that stint only lasted a month as President Kes-sai Note was, in early 2000, recruiting for a public relations officer and Yolanda got the position.

"In fact, the job was more like being an aide, a public relations officer, and a secretary, as I mostly drafted letters, wrote statements, did translations and research, and compiled daily news briefs, as well as keeping the President's appointments. For example, I'd draft letters of condolence or write to the UN (United Nations) on one issue or another, set up interviews, or screen appointments by send-

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ing callers to the proper office or authority to handle a case before they could have an audience.”

Three years later, in 2003, Yolanda felt that the skills she’d learned at the University of Waikato weren’t being put to use. Plus there was still a niggling idea that she’d like to get a law degree. “So I got an ROC (Republic of China) scholarship and went to USP in Port Vila, Vanuatu.” Having a BA short-circuited the process and Yolanda was able to go straight into core law courses doing first and second year papers. “But I only lasted there a year, because I followed my heart to Oregon.” That’s where husband Souvenir Ned was living and working: “We stayed in the US for three years, with me working as a customer representative for Tmobile USA and then for the State of Oregon as part of a health insurance group under the Department of Health and Human Services.

“In 2006, we decided to come back to Majuro and I got a job as Presidential Aide in the Office of the President once again.” Two years later, she was promoted to Clerk of the Cabinet, a job which sees her keeping the records of Cabinet meetings, distributing Cabinet Minutes to the relevant offices, and maintaining overall administrative control.

Also on returning to Majuro, she again picked up her law studies with USP’s Majuro campus, but she grimaces at the thought of how long this may take her. “I’m doing just one course per semester,” she said, scrunching her eyebrows and figuring out that at that rate it would take “forever” to finish.

“Well, maybe I’ll do more courses this year and then next year I’ll go down to Vanuatu to finish the last year. But that all remains to be seen,” she laughed, the cheery sound filling the room with fun. “I really, really am going to finish it, though.”

*Profile compiled by Karen Earnshaw,
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