



**YOLANDA McKAY**  
**USP**  
**Alumni, University**  
**of the South Pacific**





**YOLANDA MCKAY**

# One Step at a Time

## EDUCATION

### Elementary

**1987-1990:** Laura  
Elementary School,  
Marshall Islands

### 1990-1993:

Laura Calvary School,  
Marshall Islands

### Secondary

**1994-1996:** Marshall  
Islands High School

**1996-1997:** Laura  
Calvary School

### Tertiary

### 1998-1999:

University of the  
South Pacific,  
Marshall Islands  
(Preliminary and  
Foundation  
Programs)

### 2000-2000:

University of the  
South Pacific, Fiji

**2001-2004:** Univer-  
sity of the South  
Pacific. BA

**2008-?:** University  
of the South Pacific,  
Marshall Islands  
(Master's candidate)



Yolanda McKay's story is one of scholastic rags to academic riches. It includes the shame of being expelled from high school and a terrifying time when her studies were interrupted by a brutal coup.

Born in Laura, a village 25 miles from downtown Majuro, she attended Laura Elementary School for grades one to four and then Assembly of God's Calvary Elementary for grades five to eight. At the time her father, Lepton McKay, was a professional diver harvesting tropical fish

for the international aquarium market, a job that brought in relatively high sums of money compared to many of their neighbors. “They could afford to send me to the private school,” Yolanda said simply.

“Calvary had just opened and they were very eager for me to attend the best school,” she said. “Neither of my parents finished high school and they would often say to me ‘You don’t want to end up like us and not finish high school’.”

Lepton and his wife Helina’s rules for their only child, who was born in 1980, were that homework and chores had to be done first and only then was she allowed out to play with her friends. And if Yolanda skipped class, she was grounded: “That would mean I couldn’t see my friends for a week,” she said ruefully. But skipping class wasn’t a big problem for her. In these elementary school years, Yolanda was a keen student.

“I always looked forward to going to school. I was a very good student because I was eager to learn. All my friends felt the same.”

Yolanda headed into high school with good grades under her belt. “In ninth grade at MIHS (Marshall Islands High School) I was doing well. Then, in 10th and 11th grade I started to go down. I wasn’t paying attention in class and I was spending too much time thinking about boys and hanging around with my girlfriends.” She began skipping classes.

“There used to be a deli at RRE (Robert Reimers Enterprises supermarket) and we’d go there and buy ice cream or shakes and then just hang around. Or we’d hop in a friend’s truck and ‘jambo’ (cruise) around the island.”

**‘Then, in 10th and 11th grade I started to go down.’**

Things became particularly bad for this formerly excellent student in 11th grade. “Eventually I’d skipped enough classes that I was put on probation,” Yolanda said. Under school rules, probation means that a letter was given to the student to take home to the parents, who in turn were required to visit the school for a counseling session.

“But I got my cousin to sign the letter and come to the school instead of my parents,” Yolanda said with a glint in her eye. “My cousin and I were close friends, even though she was older, and I pretended that I stayed with her as my guardian. You could do naughty things like that if you lived in Laura.

“Once, twice, and I think a third time I was given probation,” Yolanda said as she ticked each one off on her fingers. “The third time was my last chance, but they let me finish the year and then I was expelled.” Her parents were not impressed: “When I gave the letter to my parents I got a lecture from my Mom. She said she was very disappointed and that she’d send me to Laura Calvary and that she’d make sure I didn’t repeat my mistakes.”

She knuckled down and managed to graduate. “I worked harder in 12th grade.” Her father was now a local policeman and wasn’t as flush with funds as before. “I considered what my parents were paying for tuition and I knew I had to make good use of the money they were spending. I got back on my feet and did well: I ended up second in my class.”

But still Yolanda deeply regretted her performance at MIHS, realizing how much schooling she’d missed in 10th and 11th grades. “When I went to USP the next year for its Preliminary program the amount of work I had to do was very hard for me because I’d missed so much.”

Many of Yolanda’s friends chose to take their next academic step at the College of the Marshall Islands, “but I’d heard USP was more

challenging.” So she took the six-month break necessary to switch from the US system used by the RMI Ministry of Education, which runs from August to June, to the British system used by USP, which runs from February to December.

Sitting in her slightly dim office at USP, her two-month-old baby softly mewling in her carrier on the floor, Yolanda admitted that her first year doing the Preliminary program was extremely difficult.

“But I always see difficulties as a challenge,” she said with spirit. One of the biggest of these was that instead of just a one-page ‘journal’ that was required in high school “I had to write much longer essays.” USP offers two streams of courses, one Science, the other Social Science. She chose the latter, with a particular focus on Geography.

“Then, nearing the end of our Foundation year, we were given the option of getting an Australian scholarship under their AusAID program to attend USP in Suva (Fiji).”

In early 2000, with five or six of her peers, Yolanda packed her bags and for the first time in life was headed off the tiny strip of land in the Pacific known as Majuro. “I was really excited. A bit nervous, but mostly excited,” she said with a big smile. “The first few months in Fiji were very hard for me though. Sometimes I would wake up and say to myself that I just wanted to go home.”

The small group of Marshallese had arrived in Fiji about three weeks before the main semester was to begin as they had to first attend a special English program. “When we arrived at the campus

**‘I was trying  
to find friends  
and also find  
out about  
architecture  
at the  
same time.’**

it looked so huge. We felt out of place and strange.” When the academic year started it seemed even worse. “Back on island (in Majuro), we’d have up to 30 students in a class,” Yolanda said. “In Suva a class would have 100 to 200 students and it was quite overwhelming.”

That said, the students of each course were broken up into smaller groups of 30 to 50 for tutorials. “These were where you’d take part in discussions and put your opinion in. The tutorials made the work much easier.”

Now learning to cope with a new society and a new school and looking forward to the next three years at USP, it all came to a full stop in a rush. In the Fiji elections of May, 1999, the first Indo-Fijian person, Mahendra Chaudhry, was made Prime Minister, with many indigenous Fijians being far from pleased.

On May 19, 2000, armed men led by rebel George Speight, entered Fiji’s national parliament and took 30 hostages, including Prime Minister Chaudhry. The country was in chaos, with many fleeing the country.

“It was one scary moment,” Yolanda said. “They closed the school and the government (of the Marshall Islands) chartered a plane and brought us back. “We did our exams here at the USP Center,” she said. “Then things calmed down in Fiji and I went back for another two semesters.”

But her education was interrupted again. “The Army had what they called a ‘mutiny’ and they closed the school again and the Australians running our scholarship program insisted on sending us all back home.”

After all this to and fro, Yolanda decided that it was better for her to stay in Majuro and continue her schooling. “Here we have smaller classes and in many ways it’s more challenging than being

in Suva. For example, let's say I'm enrolled in Geography, but there's only one student doing that course. You don't have anyone to discuss your lessons with, except for the tutorials, which are conducted on the radio about once every two weeks.

"We can contact our teachers by email, but it takes some time for them to reply. Sometimes I'd even get feedback on assignments after I'd done the exam."

To study in this way, Yolanda said you have to be very motivated. Even more so, because continuing her schooling in Majuro meant she was no longer on scholarship and she was having financial difficulties.

The director of the school, Dr. Irene Taafaki, saw Yolanda's plight and offered her the job of looking after the reception and the library.

"I worked part-time: Four hours a day doing my job and four hours studying." With just two courses left before she could attain her degree, Yolanda then began working full time at the college.

"I'm now the Academic Program Coordinator, which means I work with students organizing tutorials for them. I also organize for teachers to come in and help the students."

For example, if there is a group of law students, she will arrange for a local lawyer to teach the group part-time. She also acts as the students' academic mom. "I'm always chasing them up and reminding them of what they need to do."

Yolanda graduated from USP with a certificate in Geographic Infor-

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mation System and a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Education. Reaching down to pick up her baby, this young woman who had once been expelled from high school, then very matter-of-factly said, "So now I'm working on my master's degree in Education."

Married to Carthney Laukon, who works at the Ministry of Transportation and Communication, with three children (Codi Marlin, three, Yolani Hatty, two, and Ylissa Takinal, two months), Yolanda began her master's in 2008.

"I expect to finish by maybe June, 2011. I'm really enjoying it, even though it can be difficult. Then I hope to continue work here at USP ... but then, hopefully, I'll be paid a bit more money!"

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