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# Youth prosper with

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What is remarkable in modern day planning in the Pacific islands — everything from education and health to economic development — is the lack of appreciation for cultural skills and pride as key foundational building blocks for success.

In most urban areas in the Pacific, thousands of youth have dropped out of school and sit idly with little hope of a future. Many dropped out because they have neither the academic skills to make it, nor the cultural foundation to help them persevere through difficult times. Yet, as community-based programs in the Marshall Islands are demonstrating, these same youth are ripe for cultural learning and life skills development. It is the islands' culture fueling their ability to succeed.

"We're changing the kids' attitudes toward life," said Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) Director Alson Kelen. He has managed the canoe-building program since the late 1990s.

"It's too free (in the urban center) nowadays, there is no control over when youth get up or what they do. A lot of kids and adults don't know what they are going to do next. Many just play ukulele all day or talk story. It's the same every day."

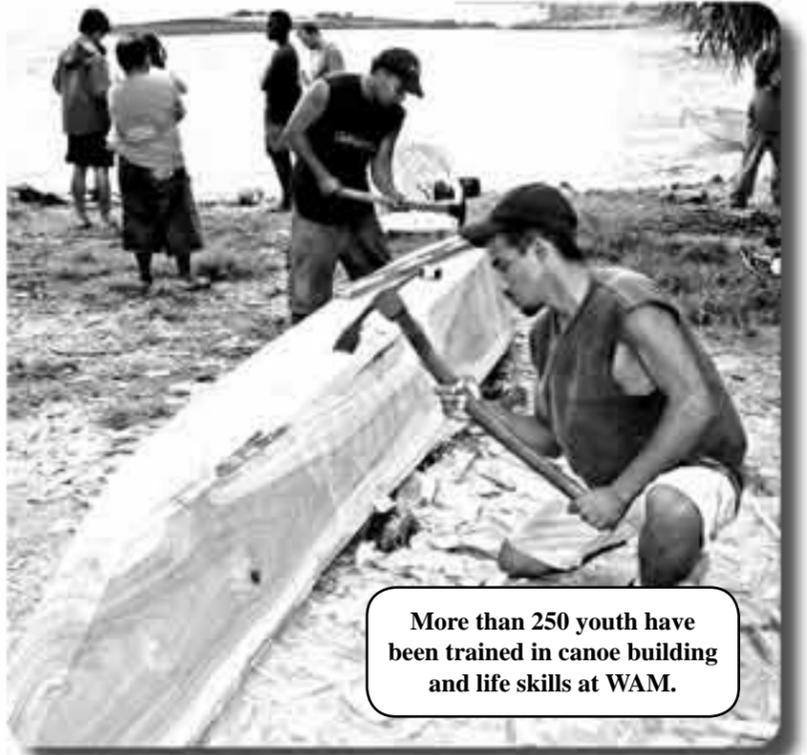
The canoe program selects 25 youth, most of whom are primary school leavers, for intensive six-month canoe building, carpentry and life skills trainings. These are young people on the fringe of society, what government officials describe as "at-risk" youth.

During the Christmas holidays, the 25 trainees who were mid-way through the latest six-month training, were assigned to various businesses to get practical work experience. "It was eye-opening for them," said Kelen. "Now they are saying things like, 'can you help me with a resume.' There is something productive in their lives. They are thinking about jobs, higher education and trainings in other places."

No less impressive is the University of the South Pacific-supported "jaki ed" weaving program. Jaki ed is the art of fine weaving that in the 19th century was a signature skill of Marshall Islands women, who wove jaki ed for clothing. The designs woven into the mats told stories about the person's family and history.

But, like outrigger canoe building until the intervention of the Waan Aelon in Majel program, jaki ed skills had nearly died out. The quality of Marshall Islands weaving — baskets, purses, mats — is recognized around the region, but jaki ed was on the verge of extinction.

Only a few such mats remained in private collections and at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu when Maria Fowler, eldest daughter of Amata Kabua, the first President of the Marshall Islands, joined with USP Campus Director Dr. Irene Taafaki to organize the first jaki ed weaving program.



More than 250 youth have been trained in canoe building and life skills at WAM.

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## Jaki ed offer lesson for both donors and planners

They have been supported by program patron Iroj Michael Kabua. In the mid-2000s, they brought together expert weavers and showed them photos of the jaki ed style mats. From that, jaki ed was reborn. Each year since, a jaki ed exhibition and auction is held in September in conjunction with the national holiday for Culture Day. This helps create enthusiasm for weavers. Last year, expert weavers and their many apprentices netted more than \$13,000 in sales and prizes at the auction.

USP, with funding from AusAID, built a weavers' house at its small Majuro campus. Daily the women weavers gather there. It is doing much more than simply teaching a skill, said Tamara Greenstone Alefaio, USP's Coordinator of Community and Continuing Education. "We see a significant boost in confidence (among the apprentice weavers)," she said. Like the canoe program, most of the apprentices had dropped out of school. "They are learning a skill few people know. But it's not just weaving. Jaki ed is special. It makes the weavers part of something bigger. They start to live weaving."

The weavers' house at USP provides a location for the young women to gather with the elder expert weavers. "The weavers' circle is a traditional space for cultural transmission," said Alefaio. "After a while, they start to bring up their problems. It is a comfortable place to talk. It's a place of trust

that brings people together." Life in the urban centers has undermined cultural norms that held Marshall Islands society together for countless generations. Western video and music culture, alcohol, the glitter of consumer products, and western education all contribute to undermining pride in a unique culture. Without pride and self-esteem, young people drop out of school in droves and see little future for themselves, leading to alcohol abuse and anti-social behavior.

"Young people don't feel comfortable with themselves because they don't know their value," said Kelen. "A hundred years ago, everyone had a position in life as fishermen, weavers and so on. Everyone participated in the culture. Today, kids are lost. They don't know where they fit in." The reason the canoe program focuses heavily on life skills in addition to teaching carpentry, math and English is because the trainees "need a positive attitude in order to use the skills put in their hands," Kelen said.

"Cultural pride and self-esteem are important to success. These young people (in the program) are proud of their culture and of being part of it." He also emphasized the point that canoes, like the jaki ed program, are about management, coordination, communication and sustainability — all key ingredients for successful national development.

The current canoe program trainees, under the supervision of three master builders, have built a model canoe that will go for display, together with a video about Waan Aelon in Majel, to a museum in Japan. "Because of things like this, the trainees esteem is boosted," said Kelen. "It's the same with jaki ed. From the annual jaki ed auction, the weavers know so many people are displaying their mats in their homes. People are proud to put the weavers' work on their walls so visitors can see."

Cultural pride combines with a

# culture talents



The jaki ed weavers' circle is a potent learning tool for young women.

marketable skill for both the weavers and canoe builders. The annual auction has demonstrated the marketability of jaki ed mats and generated significant money for both expert weavers and the apprentice weavers. "This is a sustainable livelihood," said Alefaio of the jaki ed weaving. "One hundred percent of the profit goes to the girls." Jaki ed skill development also leads to young women learning to make other types of mats and handicrafts, further increasing their ability to earn money.

From its start in Majuro, the jaki ed training program has been expanded by USP to Ebeye, Namdrik, Ailinglaplap, Arno and Mejit so 60 apprentices have been or are being taught by experts weavers. The canoe program has trained more than 230 over the past decade, including 50 young women. The government's National Training Council funds the jaki ed weaving skills program and Waan Aelon in Majel canoe trainings.

"When the trainees come to us, they are in their late teens and early 20s," said Kelen. "They have no social security numbers and I wonder if they have ever thought about a job."

Waan Aelon in Majel prepares the trainees in important ways in addition to life skills and carpentry. During the program it gets photo identification and Social Security cards made for the trainees. They open savings accounts for each trainee into which modest stipends are deposited, and get them health clearances from the hospital. When they graduate from the program — the canoe program has an extraordinarily high graduation rate in a country known for poor student achievement — they are prepared to enter the working world.

**'A hundred years ago, everyone had a position in life as fishermen, weavers and so on. Everyone participated in the culture. Today, kids are lost. They don't know where they fit in.'** — Alson Kelen

Both the weaving and canoe programs open horizons for the youth participants, which has a ripple impact on their families. "A lot of our trainees won't be canoe builders (when they leave the program)," said Kelen. "But they can be carpenters or work in a kitchen or drive a taxi. From the training, they have the whole picture of life." Participation of the youth improves their relationships with their families. Kelen said that in some cases, parents were not proud of their children because they had gotten into drinking, sniffing gasoline or chewing tobacco and betelnut.

"But seeing their kids' names in the newspaper, seeing their activities, the parents can now say, 'that's my kid.' The success of each trainee brings their households together," said Kelen.

Kelen said he hopes that funding agencies will look beyond the carpentry skills developed by these trainings to see the big picture — how the less tangible life skills are producing a foundation for success. This in turn fuels the success of their communities.

"My payment," said Kelen, "is I'm one of the richest men in the world because I can put a smile on parents' faces, and get the kids motivated to be up at 7:30am to go to work."

## International Organization for Migration (IOM)

### Internship Opportunities — Majuro Office



Position Title: Intern – volunteer coordinator  
Position Reference: MAJ - 001  
Duration: 3 – 6 months  
Location: Majuro, RMI Deadline:

IOM is an inter-governmental organization supporting the Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands across a variety of sectors with a particular focus on disaster risk reduction, climate change and adaptation. IOM is funded by various donors in the north Pacific, including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID)

IOM works in close partnership with national and local authorities, international organizations, as well as, a large network of local non-governmental organizations in helping ensure that communities are well prepared for the next extreme natural event, particularly those that may be climate-induced.

IOM is offering an exciting opportunity for a hard-working, energetic and motivated individual, who may be studying at the tertiary level or have recently graduated, to gain experience with this reputable international organization, which has over 460 existing offices in over 100 countries and an increasingly strong presence throughout the region.

#### Internships with IOM provide a range of experiences, including:

- Coordinating and leading a team of youth volunteers
- Assisting with conducting trainings such as: humanitarian training modules and Emergency First Responder (EFR)
- Taking part in humanitarian demonstrations and simulations
- Supporting community exercises in Hazard Vulnerability and Capacity Mapping
- Helping support events related to climate change education and disaster risk reduction — such as, public fairs, free movie nights, public awareness raising activities, etc.
- Liaison with local non-governmental organizations and faith-based groups
- Working alongside local leaders and relevant government authorities

IOM interns have the opportunity to be involved in a large range of activities which ensures their work is always interesting, while also enabling them to acquire new knowledge and learn new skills. Interns will have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, as well as, gaining knowledge and skills in administrative procedures of a large organization, while contributing to important work as part of a harmonious multi-cultural team

#### Qualifications:

1. Bachelor or Associate degree (or equivalent) in general social science, public health, science, education, communications, or related fields.
2. Strong interpersonal skills and ability to write and communicate at a professional level in English.
3. Fluency in Marshallese is preferred.
4. Excellent PC skills in MS Word and MS Office; the ability to communicate electronically and use the Internet.
5. Highly motivated to learn and apply new skills in a challenging and dynamic working environment.
6. Ability to handle multiple priorities and deadlines effectively.
7. Proven leadership skills and a passion for reducing the vulnerability of the Marshall Islands to natural hazards.

**Remuneration:** Internships are unremunerated positions; however interns are provided a generous monthly allowance to assist in covering transport and other costs associated with their assignment.

**To Apply:** Interested persons must post, hand-deliver or email the following documents to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) no later than 11 February 2013.

#### Mandatory Application Documents:

1. One page Statement of Interest
2. Curriculum Vitae or Resume
3. Contact information of at least 3 referees
4. Copies of academic transcript/s – **Do Not Send Originals**

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