

## The Marshall Islands Preschool

As told by Leah Early in *The Circle of Life* (2000), pp. 154-156

The planning consultation that formally launched the Marshall Island Human Development Project was held in the fall of 1974. It was not surprising that a preschool program was one of the first proposals to come out of the consultation – children are highly valued in Marshallese society. Project staff felt confident about launching the preschool: we had the Fifth City Preschool curriculum from earlier work in Chicago and Kathleen had been a member of the Fifth City Preschool staff for several years. But we did not have the children and we did not know how to find them.

Queenie Ria decided to solve the problem of finding the children. She had been the treasurer at KITCO (Kwajelein Importing and Trading Company), a business on the island of Majuro which we had helped to turn around financially during the early 1970s. Several Marshallese leaders had asked, “If KITCO can be turned around, what can be done for all of us?” Queenie and her husband had been involved in the planning consultation that resulted. The community’s long-range vision and plan included a preschool.

Queenie Ria was a joyful doer and said, “You get the curriculum together and I’ll get the teachers and kids.” A parent group, led by Queenie, recruited five teachers, gathered the children, and collected the fees.

We had originally intended to offer a morning session for 50 children. But on the day the preschool opened, so many more children showed up than we could accommodate in the one session, we had to amend our initial plans.

Queenie said, “No problem. You have the five teachers; they’ll work in the afternoon. I’ll just get 50 more kids.” With Queenie’s gusto and assurance, the afternoon session was filled with 52 children. Between the two sessions, three ICA staff members and five Marshallese community teachers taught more than 100 children five days a week.

From where I worked in the KITCO offices – on the second floor of a huge warehouse – I could watch the preschool progress unfold. The ground floor of the north wing of the warehouse was designated for the preschool, with its own separate outside door, apart from the business entrance to the warehouse. A sign was placed nearby which read, “Marshall Islands Preschooling Institute”. The teachers, parents,

and volunteers painted a mural on the side of the concrete block warehouse wall. Parents pitched in and created a playground just under the large mural, away from trucks and the busy street.

Shortly after the preschool opened, I flew to Ebeye, a small island about 250 miles from the Majuro atoll, on business. A woman who I had never met before stopped me on the path and asked, "What is this about a preschool in Majuro? I understand they have a hundred children in the preschool."

"Yes and those children are learning things," I said enthusiastically.

The woman shook her head. "I don't know about this. How can that be? Marshallese children this little do not learn."

I assumed that woman had heard news of the preschool on Majuro by way of "the coconut wireless," the mystifying communication system understood only by the Marshallese. It was an effective way of spreading news, rumors and stories throughout the islands and atolls. Her doubts stemmed from three pieces of incredible data which were simply hard for the average Marshallese person to believe:

- 1) more than 100 five-year-olds were attending a preschool;
- 2) effective teaching was being done and the children were learning; and
- 3) Marshall's parents were willing to pay for its child's participation.

All this was true, but the facts were incongruous with her previous experiences with education.

"I don't go into the preschool," I explained, "but I hear the children singing because the preschool is located in a temporarily walled-off area of the KITCO warehouse. The music and the voices spill over and through walls and floors, out the doors and into the light Pacific breezes." As if to add a touch of realism, I added with a smile, "Why, the KITCO warehousemen know how to sing all the preschool songs!"

"And I understand the parents pay to have their children go to school?"

"That's right, they pay \$5 a month for tuition for their children."

We named the main implementation efforts that came out of the planning consultation “miracles.” They were the major focus of activity that finally resulted in a program, a structure, or new community pattern. The Majuro Preschool was one of the miracles. Perhaps the naming happened instantly. Perhaps calling the implementation efforts “miracles” happened as a casual reflection something like: “Why, when we actually get that accomplished (for example:

- a Marshall Islands Frozen Fish Processing Plant,
- a Multi-Purpose Repair Center,
- rehabilitation of the ‘downtown shopping area’ on Majuro,
- Saturday Clean-Up Days,
- an Outer Island Health Delivery System, or
- a Majuro Preschool –

whatever people hoped for), that would be a miracle!”

Miracles were useful things common people dreamed about, but supposed impossible. They were made possible by local work involving many minds and many hands. The very fact that Queenie Rae’s recruitment, the teachers’ hard work, the parents’ support, and our own actions came together to produce a preschool was, in fact, miraculous! On reflection, a miracle was not anything special. A miracle was something we did every day, but we called it a miracle because the work and the results of the work created a sign of hope for the people of the Marshall Islands.

As the various miracles or programs became visible, present, real, and functioning, possibilities grew. A weakened and downtrodden people, for the most part forgotten by the world, strained to become self-reliant, self-confident, and fully participating citizens of the globe. The impossible became possible. At first, the realization glowed as a lighted match flickers in a gentle wind on a moonless night. Unspoken hope happened quickly and disappeared just as quickly. The next time it emerged, hope was a stuttering, stammering, softly whispered: “Perhaps, we ... might, may-be.” The spirit of self-determination caught on tenuously, then grew and became stronger. We hoped that it would ignite peoples’ imaginations.

During a documentation period years later, Amata Kabua, then President of the new nation called the Republic of the Marshall Islands, was interviewed regarding the results of the work of “The Blue-Shirts” (the name ICA staff members were given by the Marshallese). He quickly admitted that though the planning consultations were invaluable, not all the targeted programs worked. Some did, and some did not. “However,” he said, “that was not what was important. What was important was that the ICA was

instrumental in changing the imaginations of the Marshallese people.” When I heard this, I wept. The years of caring investment and expended lives had created the miracle for which we had hoped.