

MAJURO: CLAIMING THE MIRACLES

I want to tell you a few things about Majuro that make it a very special place. One is that when you get up in the morning, all you hear is water, and you hear water all day long. Majuro is the vastest area of water that I have ever seen.

There is just a little wisp of a ring--almost nothing--and that is Majuro. There are a hundred wisps of islands that comprise the Marshall Islands. That is significant, because the people there decided to claim those little strips of nothing, call that a great nation, and build upon it. That makes the place Majuro.

Majuro is also an overlay of centuries of foreign intervention. One civilization came in right after another. The Spanish sailed by but the natives looked so mean that they refused to leave the ship; they just fired cannons at them. A little bit later the German whalers decided that this was a likely spot to do a little economic development. They taught the Marshallese people how to grow and harvest copra. Time passed, and the missionaries came in big ships called the Morning Stars.

The Japanese occupation of the Islands in World War II was very oppressive, but people talk about it as a creative time because it was very productive. In a strict, obedient society they developed the technological skills that some of the atolls do not have even today. The Marshallese people learned a great deal from the Japanese. After the war, the United Nations formed the "Trust Territory of the Pacific." It has six districts, and one of these is the Marshall Islands.

This history has forged a people with a strong ontological sense of who they are. They are a people with resolve. They are confused about their culture, to be sure, but their inner resolve is evident to everyone. The resolve comes from the fortitude of a nation of people that dared to sail the sea and then audaciously, claim that land as their home.

The Marshall Islands also symbolizes a world issue that the United Nations and the United States in particular is struggling with. What does it mean to be trusteeship? What does it mean to be a guardian of a developing nation? What is the responsibility of one who cares and knows that self-sufficiency enables people to stand on their own and get their gifts into history? For those of us in Majuro that question is particularized in the issue of how to enable the Marshallese to do the work that has to be done.

Our involvement in the Marshall Islands began through the interest of Jude Samson. Jude Samson is a very secular man who happens to be a spirit man, and his position is comparable to that of bishop of churches in the Islands. Samson attended an ITI and then requested two teachers for the Majuro high school. They were sent and in a couple of years, two more teachers joined them. We call that the great wave of educational impact.

There was a second wave which had to do with economics. Here again, the key was the endorsement of Jude Samson, who said that we were a people with methods and vision, and that he would trust the future of the Kwajalein Import and Trading Company to us.

There are some hair-raising stories about KITCO. In any other situation, particularly in the United States, KITCO would have been declared dead, bankrupt, but there are no laws in the trust territory to define or even give a company that kind of value. So you see the problem of calling it bankrupt.

A plan was devised to allow payment of the \$400,000 debt over a period of ten years, with one half of the debt to be paid in the first year. Sales in that first year totalled over \$100,000. The loan was paid and we decided that was not enough. The decision is to double sales this year. We can forget the salvation tactics. KITCO has had a fresh start and is leaping ahead to the next step.

A turning point for KITCO was its board's invitation to ICA to do a consult last fall on what it would mean to develop all areas of the community. The gift of the consult was the birthing of a very comprehensive plan, the Marshall's Human Development Project.

This is the year of the fourth wave --the wave of social impact-- in the Marshalls. The preschool was formed out of the work of the consult. It was clear that we had curriculum and possibilities from 5th City, but early in January we began to wonder how to find the children.

Queenie Reel, one of the Marshallese women who participated in the consult, solved that problem. "You get the curriculum together," she told us, "and I will find the teachers and the kids." That first day we had room for 50 kids, and 52 showed up along with 5 teachers. We later expanded to a full-day program and Queenie found 50 more kids for us, so now we have a hundred children in that preschool.

In January, the social wave took the form of the directorship of a social agency--MCAA, and working with some rather creative programs in apprenticeship, the elderly and health throughout the outer islands. There was the educational wave, an economic wave and then a global wave when all the guardians showed up with their talents and their care. Next, there was a social wave and now waves are just breaking loose all over Majuro.

People ask me most about the miracles. A miracle is something you do every day. It is not anything special, but you call it a miracle because it is a sign of hope. You could call the preschool a miracle. It is clear that I could not have done that preschool by myself. The people had to respond to fill those places.

I went to the island of Ebeye on business. A woman stopped me in the middle of the street to ask about 'that preschool in Majuro.' "I understand they have a hundred children in that preschool," she said. "That's right," I told her. "I hear that they pay to have their children in school," she continued. "They pay \$5 a month for tuition," I said. "Well," she said, "I understand that they are learning things. Nobody learns anything in the schools in Majuro."

A miracle means deciding that all the resources you have are going to be utilized. The ships in the trust territory are very important. Since the beginning of the Marshallese culture, a man who could travel on water was a man of power. Kings personally trained navigators and hid them away so no one else knew they had them. Only a few men actually knew how to use those stick charts because that was the power, you see. This is still true today.

All of the ships on the island are missing a number of parts that are vital --like engines or anchors. One of the miracles this quarter is called "Seven Ships Sailing." that is not a poem; that is dead serious. We decided that we would make seven of those ships navigable if we had to rattle every closet in the world to get those parts.

Don Baker, who came to Majuro from Australia, told us immediately that he could not do anything. He did not have the tools, he certainly had not been on very many ships, and he was not sure he could even get to the moorings to look at them.

The Ta-Tommy Maroo has become a symbol for Majuro. The ship had been inoperable for nine months and it had never been in for an overhaul. The Ta-Tommy Maroo was up in the Kwajalein atoll and Mr. Mollik, its owner, wanted Don to go up and see what he could do. It is only a day's flight, so we put Don on a plane to Kwajalein.'

After he left we heard that he might drown just boarding the ship because the engine room was filled with oil and water. Even if he got the boat started, it could get sick again on its maiden journey home and float out. So we were really worried when two weeks passed and we had not heard a word.

One day the radio started. "Psst, Pllugh, Ppplloghp," and we heard a voice. "This is Don Baker, this is Don Baker in Kwajalein, calling KITCO Majuro." We all leaped to the radio. "Come in Don, come in. Are you okay? Did you drown in the engine room?" "The crew has mutinied...the crew has mutinied. We are out of diesel fuel." "Well, Don, what are you going to do?" "Nelson and I remain." (Nelson is the poor Marshallese engineer who has been on the ship for nine months). "Nelson and I remain and are resolved. It is deeper than ever."

We waited two more weeks and suddenly word came. . . "The Ta-Tommy Maroo is coming back." Finally, the ship came through the pass, and it was a great happening. The ship actually worked!! They had to steal some parts, talk the trust territory out of two generators, make a forge on the back of the ship and take a car hub cap and create a part with a fingernail file, but she sailed, and that is what we call a miracle in Majuro.

The consult was the impetus to begin some necessary construction and rehab work. Sheldon Hill designed a low-cost housing project, then worked with the local businessmen in their offices. They envisioned together what the possibilities were for each company. Sheldon drew sketches for the companies and the businessmen were amazed. "Could we really look like that?"

These visions took form in the new business district, "The Magnificent Quarter Mile." The Magnificent Quarter Mile triggered other possibilities. In just three days a community bulletin board appeared. We began a sidewalk program and we now have a plan to plant a live coconut tree every 94 feet. We have created a boulevard that any man in the world would be proud to walk on, because this is a special place. The Magnificent Quarter Mile is one of the miracles in Majuro.

Consult discussions resulted in the formation of a non-profit company called Trans-Atoll Service Corporation (TASC) to move directly on the economic. One of the many functions of TASC is volume buying. We figured that by pooling the orders of 12-15 companies, we would be able to demand price cuts. It is a rather open secret that West Coast suppliers would rather trade anywhere but Micronesia, and that they charge a hefty premium just for doing business in such an unsophisticated place.

The first shipment of rice ordered through TASC arrived. Rice usually sells for \$9.75 for a 25 pound bag. A Marshallese family eats rice 3 times a day. A family the size of Queenie's with ten children, which is average, eats three or four bags of rice a week. Queenie must earn only 65 cents an hour, so she must be spending at least three-fourths of her money on rice. Well, the retail price for this first shipment of rice was only \$5.65, and people wondered what was happening.

The real miracle came when we ordered \$120,000 worth of mixed goods and suddenly discovered that the ship wasn't coming. Twelve retail stores were waiting for this ship and if they did not have their goods for the two-month period, those businesses would be ruined. So quickly, we sent out telegrams to change the routing. We decided that we could transship the order. We could bring it into Kwajalein on a ship that services the military, then transship it to Majuro.

When the ship arrived in Kwajalein, the military began asking, "What is T-A-S-C?" They thought it sounded very military and let it through. My husband, Lee Early was questioned about TASC on the phone. A young woman asked, "Is this with the military?" He responded, "Look, young woman, I am the chief executive, Director of TASC. Let's get that stuff released." That really worked well. The name really served the mission well.

One of the companies in TASC has a private ship which was sent to Kwajalein with several men from each of the companies in TASC to do the cargo transfer. They unloaded but they ran into a problem because the army would not let them use any forklifts, pallets or hand trucks. This meant that every single case of the 120,000 lbs. of goods had to be picked up and carried to the ship by hand. That is what they did.

The first response that the Marshallese have to anything is "this is not a problem." That, of course, is not our response. They just decide it will be done, and they do it. When the ship got to Majuro we had to unload every single box. We figured we moved one of the mountains in the Pacific bottom by the time we carried that cargo two or three times.

Meanwhile, everybody was scared to death. Ten people had borrowed every calculator and adding machine on the island to figure out the cost. Our fear was that the price would end up higher than the competitor's down the street. People began coming to the warehouse to see the goods and a crowd gathered. That was a tremendous happening, and it is just one of the things that TASC is about. We call that a miracle in Majuro.

Another miracle had to do with how to sustain such an operation when basically TASC has no money. The various companies purchased shares at a value of \$1500 each. After this mountain of goods came in, the number of companies rose to 17. People needed a concrete sign to point to before they really could say, "This is going to happen. This is not just talk. This will make a difference."

We decided that the long-range picture had to be considered, and the companies agreed that they would apply for a \$400,000 SBA loan. Financial statements and records must be submitted to receive those loans. Most banks require audits or verifications of various titles.

Most of these companies are not very sophisticated. One man, who owns a fleet of 13 taxicabs, stores all his money in Kool cigarette cartons, and when he gets a good pile he takes it down to the bank. Another man who does not exactly understand banking, writes checks until the bank notifies him that he cannot write anymore and then he waits for awhile to write more.

It has never been necessary to keep records because the Marshallese have always been cut off and isolated. Now, the possibility of being self-sufficient and of participating in a global economy comes with demands that the Marshallese participate in the global economy on its terms.

"The 12 Audits" is the name of the miracle. We have been working all quarter, trying to find facts and figures, back statements, and so on. It has been an incredible experience to write the histories of these 17 companies. Mr. Mi started his bakery by borrowing 3 cans of flour, some shortening, and somebody's oven and now the man has a bakery. He does not wrap the bread and call it wonder-filled, but he bakes bread. Mr. Tabigerick has the finest taxis on the Island and there is no better buy in the world than a 20 cent taxi in Majuro. You can ride up and down the Magnificent Quarter Mile for 20 cents.

We have a CPA in Majuro and he is going crazy. We have had several collegiums on what CPA's can do and what they cannot do. John Ockles, a guardian who is in banking, landed on the Island with his briefcase and said, "Get me to the books." In one weekend, Ockles, Larry White and Robert Miller produced 9 statements prepared without audit. They are legal with CPA's, legal with the SBA and legal with the law.

We have two more authentic audits to do before we can send Early and Grant LeBarn to a meeting with SBA in Honolulu. SBA sent a man to Majuro. He sat in on a board meeting and he said he has never seen anything like this before. You can laugh, but where in the world could you get 12 businessmen to do anything together but play golf?

The only technicality left is that in the history of SBA no one has ever done a pool loan program. That is what this particular company qualifies for because KITCO is a pool of companies. A great deal of spiritizing must be done to convince SBA, but I think we are winning there.

I want to mention the new industries. You cannot continue importing everything because in most Trust Territory districts, a dollar turns over three times and then goes back to either the U.S. or Japan. In the Marshalls, it turns over 11 times and then disappears. So, you have to do something to enable money to stay there and stop this impossible drain.

The "24 New Industries In 2 Years" is such a program. After much brainstorming and talking to everybody on the island, we know that all kinds of coconut products and handicraft industries are possibilities for growth.

Three hundred Japanese fishing vessels in our waters are catching our fish, taking it back to Japan, canning it, then selling it back to us. One of our new fishing industries is called BACO, Inc. B-A-C-O spells sharks in Marshallese. The problem again, is that they need a boat. Netting sharks is a dangerous business without a boat. We have borrowed every boat on the atoll a number of times. When you ask a Marshallese for something, since he understands that he shares everything he has, he cannot say no. But these men need a boat. They have applied for an EDLF--Economic Development Loan Fund--from the Trust Territory, and have been granted \$25,000. It looks like they are going to get some equipment.

We have a multi-purpose repair center and their motto is "If it isn't broken, we can't fix it." A small contradiction is the lack of tools, but the center has now initiated funding procedures. If some company here in the States decided to seed that industry, the results could be tremendous because everything in Majuro breaks 2 days after it arrives on the Island.

Getting parts is nearly impossible. It is just a terrible drain of possibility and spirit. Yet that project can "take off" right now. It already has. I told you what Baker did with that ship. Just imagine what he could do if he had more than a fingernail file.

I have talked about Phase I so far. We have a Phase II, and crucial to its success is the Inter-Island Ferry System. If this does not succeed, everything else is a big joke. If the Magnificent Quarter Mile excited people, and enabled them to walk rather than shuffle, the ferryboats would link not only families and islands, but it would allow mobility, trade and commerce.

If you take a boat out to an island now, when you disembark and the boat leaves, you are stuck there for three months or six months. This is the trap of isolation, not only from the world, but isolation within the nation itself.

Majuro could not happen without this guardian dynamic. A lot of energy and creativity has gone into making that a sign of social demonstration and a sign of hope. Boat parts were to come from Japan but they got stuck at the Guam airport. We cabled a guardian named Stan Rice and said, "Stan, a compressor is coming that way. Look for it." He met every Japanese plane until he found the part, then sent it out on the next plane. We cannot even get stationery out there. If you write Jon Thorsen a letter, stationery comes.

I am not just talking about logistics but also the skills that people have contributed to the Majuro task. A man like John Ockles who spends two weeks to help get an impossible task like the statements done is just invaluable. Sheldon Hill spent two weeks working on low cost housing, and the whole mindset has changed because he created pictures of houses designed for that culture of large extended families.

By Sheldon's design, you could manufacture module units and take them to the outer islands. We believe that this 4-plex complex can be built for \$3000. The average loan for housing in Majuro now is \$5000. Crude buildings of tin and plywood cost \$10-15,0000 to construct. That is the work of a guardian who has decided that he can use his gifts and place them somewhere that makes a difference.

Orvis Agee, who is 72 years old, showed up in Majuro with two shirts, 2 pair of pants, a slide rule and a ball of string, and he went to work! Orvis needed some tools, so I went to a Marshallese carpenter and said, "Taro, Orvis is going to be here for awhile and needs a hammer and some nails. Could he borrow your tools?" No one every says no, but Taro disappeared for a day. I discovered that he was watching Orvis work. He reappeared the next day with a long box of tools including his electric saw and said, "It will be all right for him to work with them. I watched him and he is a good man."

There are some men in Majuro now, who understand that they have about 30 more years of life and that it is possible for that living to be creative and full of spirit. But it is no rose-colored garden. I worked in 5th City before I went to Majuro, and we were clear that revolutionary change took a long time, and we were also clear that your work was never done. After you build one low-cost housing project, you have to build another. One grand shipment of volume purchased goods is not enough. It is a long haul. You do not immediately see the end results.

It dawned on me for the first time this year that all the energy that we have poured into Majuro and all those resources, does not make the suffering in Cambodia and Laos any lighter. People still experience pain and death. You know that we are not going to eradicate the pain in India. Nevertheless, there are people who show up caring in every culture, caring and Majuro is about that decision to sustain and catalyze life.

Walkup Silk is the elder of the KITCO compound. A short, skinny, wiry man, all wrinkled, he is one of those that we wanted to retire immediately because we had too many on the payroll. But the board insisted that he had to stay. I did not see why then but I do now. He guards the tradition and you must always consult him about anything important.

I meet Walkup every morning and it has been the same greeting for 2 years. "Good morning, Leah." "Good morning, Walkup." If I stop there, he stops and waits for the next line. "How are you today, Walkup." "Bright as a morning star," he replies. We had been greeting each other for 3 months this way before I asked, "What are we saying when we do this, Walkup?" Walkup explained "For the Marshallese people the morning star is the first light of day. It is the one that proclaims that you have a new day on your hands. It is like being told that the day is here."

The great thing about this particular social demonstration is that it exposes every man to the possibility of using his talents and skills, and giving them away. That is the birth or the rebirth of the guildsman and that is exciting to me. Majuro is nothing

Majuro is nothing in itself. It is just one of 24 social demonstrations. Perhaps you want to go to Majuro. There is no telling what else is out there. We have not even started. Town Meeting '76 is going to break loose and be the sign of hope here. I am convinced of it. That will really be something.

--Leah Early  
April 11, 1975