

Living and Leaving a
Legacy of Hope: Stories
by New Generation
Pacific Leaders



ational Library of New Zealand Cataloguing-in-Publication data

ring and Leaving a Legacy of Hope: Stories by New Generation Pacific
aders/ Editors Kabini Sanga & Cherie Chu.

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BN 978-0-475-12340-4

Leadership –Pacific 2. New Generation leaders- stories

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9.12995-dc 22

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- Word processing Pine Southon
- Typesetting Jenni Hammonds and Irene Sattar
- Proof reading Laura van Peer and Jenni Hammonds
- Production Laura van Peer and Megan Hart
- Printing Astra Print
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Cover explanation: Niu-tupu/young coconut shoot, properly nurtured, produces
fruit.

Cover photos: Edgar Pollard and Kabini Sanga

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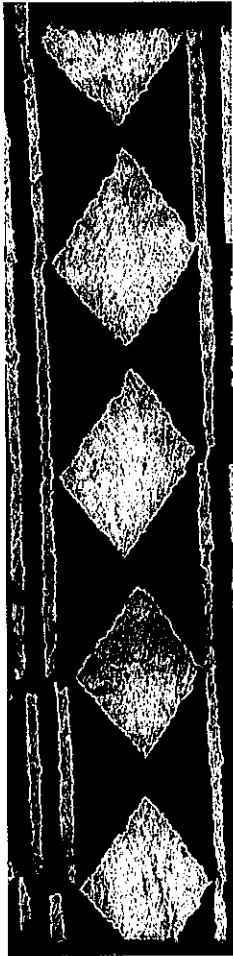
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Billy Fito'o

Billy Fito'o hails from Malaita in the Solomon Islands. He is an experienced educator, having taught and managed schools from primary through to senior secondary in Solomon Islands. He holds formal qualifications in teaching and education from the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education and the University of the South Pacific. At the time of writing Billy is near-completion of his Master of Education degree at Victoria University of Wellington. Billy knows about leadership, having learnt to turn his 'failures' into success through hard work, faithfulness and courage. For a lad who only reached Form 2 (Grade 8) and branded a troublesome youth in his village, his life story is an admirable lesson on leadership.

*Bula Nivaka Billy
With best wishes
God bless
Ray 23/12/08*

On Courage and Hope

Billy Fito'o

It is a cloudy day,
Everywhere is quiet,
A hopeless lad is sitting in a small dark hut.
The sky is crying,
Tear drops are trickling from the lad's eyes,
Mixing with the pouring rain.
Suddenly,
He sees a beam of light
It is a rainbow,
It is my hope.

Promising beginnings

Mine is a story of failure and hardship. It is also a story of hard work, determination, courage and hope. I was born in 1967 into a family of thirteen, including my parents. In all, I have eight brothers and two sisters. I entered primary school at age seven, in 1974. It was a village school owned by a church authority. While I was in class two, the school was closed to merge with a nearby school owned by the then Malaita Council.

I sat the secondary school "Hicks Test" examinations in 1979 when I was in class six, the final class of my primary education. I passed the exams and entered secondary school in 1980 – one of only five final year students from my primary school to do so. In those days, five was a large number. It was common for no one to move on to secondary school. Yet, given the total number of students who were seeking to enter secondary schools, it was very small. I was also one of the three to be accepted into a national secondary school. The other two went to a provincial secondary school. In those days Solomon Islands had only five national secondary schools, so getting into one was something of an achievement. Out of the thousands

of class six students who sat the secondary entrance examination, only a very small percentage made it to form one. Provincial high schools during those days were discriminated against in a highly academic system, and portrayed as lower standard schools. To obtain a space in a national secondary school was a very big achievement, not only for the student but also for the parents and extended family members.

My first year at secondary school started off very well. I was determined to make the most of the opportunity. I even started to boast about going to university upon completion of my secondary education. I boasted to my former primary classmates, who had been 'pushed-out' of the education system due to the lack of secondary spaces. Things, however, started to change towards the end of my first year at secondary school. I started to associate with new friends, senior students who had the habit of smoking. My decision to join them in those bad habits ultimately led to my expulsion from secondary school in later years. As Henry Davenport Northrop warns, "...companionship with the good, growing natures will always find their best nourishment; while companionship with the bad will only be fruitful in mischief..."

Early failure

I left secondary school not as a 'push-out' who had failed my national examinations, but because of behavioural problems, wrong associations and bad influences. Being quite young, and still somewhat immature, I was unable to withstand the influence of my peer group at school. Consequently, the school sent me back to my home village as an expelled student.

In the Solomon Islands, the general perception from people is that education is the pathway to having a white collar job. People see education as a doorway to job opportunities, the first step to employment in the formal sector of the economy. Therefore, for me to leave school without a good reason was unacceptable to my parents. My quick exit came as a big blow to my family, especially since my parents had already tasted the fruits of higher education from the earlier success of my elder brothers, already formally employed.

In my young mind, the expulsion was not a big deal. I was wrong. From day one of leaving school I did not feel welcome back in my own family. While they did not physically chase me out of the house, their words and tone of their voices made it clear that they were very angry. This made me realise that I had made a terrible mistake. It would seem that I had taken the dreams and aspirations of my family and trampled on them.

The money my parents had spent on my education over the years was now totally wasted. It seemed like there had been a death in the family. In contrast to my eldest brother, who was the first in the extended family to go to university thereby bringing great pride to the immediate family, the extended family and the entire community, I was a *masta-liu* (unemployed, aimless school drop-out).

The school departure experience caused my immediate family and extended family to vent their anger on me. I was often openly rebuked and ridiculed in front of family members and my peers. I tried to reconcile with my family by doing small things like helping in the garden, repairing their houses and helping with community tasks but this did little to comfort my family. When working hard in the garden with my bush knife, people from the community would say "*Sapos iu no spoelem sikulu blo iu, bae iu no holem knife olsem ia*" (If you continued with your education you wouldn't be working with a knife in the garden). Even family members would look at me and say "*Sapos iu sikulu gud ba, bae iu no stand lo hot sun olsem ia*" (If you had completed your education, you wouldn't be standing here in the hot sun). My peers often mocked me; "*Mi fala ting se bae iu difren nao, bata iu kam baek fo iumi sem sem nomoa, for askem simoko*" (We thought that you would be different from us, but you have come to be the same as we are, to just beg for cigarettes).

All of this ridicule started to make me depressed. I felt like an object floating in the ocean, with large swells and raging seas tossing me to and fro without any destination. I was lost. Without direction and a long way from the shore. I felt worthless – a lost human being with no future, destiny or purpose.

Not only was I subjected to ridicule, but worst of all, I had become a burden to my family for my material needs – my clothing, my food. When any of my family members were obliged to buy me something I would have to endure further criticism from them first. It was a humbling experience. Having no one recognise value in my existence. My addiction to smoking tobacco which I had acquired from school made life even more awkward. With no formal employment to earn money, to feed my smoking habit, I was reduced to continuously begging for cigarettes from those who could afford them. Often when begging for cigarettes, my smoking peers would say “*Samting iu lesi fo school gud fo hem nao ia?*” (Is that why you left school, to beg for cigarettes?).

It was this stage of despair that I learnt an important leadership lesson. I said to myself, “I will not waste my opportunities again. I will not waste my life. I will not be a shame to my family or community. Instead, I will be an asset. I will be useful and purposeful. I will seize my opportunities and make something good out of them.”

Such experiences further reduced my morale. I was negatively influenced by others and others by me. In 1983 I was arrested for public mischief and locked up in the police cells overnight with some of my peers. As the youngest member of the group I was released after spending only seven hours in the cell. By this time others in the community viewed me as a bad lad, someone who went around causing trouble in the community. It was this stage of despair that I learnt an important leadership lesson. I said to myself, “I will not waste my opportunities again. I will not waste my life. I will not be a shame to my family or community. Instead, I will be an asset. I will be useful and purposeful. I will seize my opportunities and make something good out of them.”

“Live with people of elevated character, and you will feel lifted up and enlightened in them. Live with the wolves and you will learn to howl!” (Spanish Proverb).

New beginnings

In 1984, my teaching career began unexpectedly when I started work as an untrained teacher in a primary school. Untrained teachers in the Solomon Islands were teachers who did not have formal teaching qualifications. They were employed to fill the gaps in schools caused by a shortage of trained teachers. I did not apply for the job and, in truth, had no prior thought of becoming a teacher. As I had not completed my secondary education, and having been discouraged by people’s comments, I felt unworthy to be considered for formal employment or leadership roles. It was purely by coincidence that I became an untrained teacher.

A man in my village was the headmaster of a very isolated rural primary school in the central region of Malaita. The school was situated high up in the mountains, almost a five hour walk from the coast over rough bush tracks. Trained teachers generally preferred not to teach in schools like this because life in small isolated communities could be quite hard. The headmaster asked me if I would like to go live with him and assist him with his teaching workload. I accepted the proposition and we went to the school that very night. It was Sunday and we had to travel overnight in order to arrive at the school to start classes on Monday morning. I did not even know whether the headmaster’s intention was to recruit me as a teacher, or just for me to accompany him to his school. I left without telling my family where I was going. Later, when they found out I was teaching up in the mountains, they initially thought it was quite amusing. Given my failure in formal education, my relatively young age and my recent bad behaviour, my family did not perceive me to be a very likely candidate for a teaching position. However, they were pleased I was doing something positive.

I worked extremely hard to change my world and people’s perceptions of me. I readily accepted work that other teachers did not enjoy doing.

Because I started teaching in the final term of the 1984 school year, my work had to be done on a purely voluntary basis. Despite that, I saw it as both an opportunity and a privilege. My only chance to start my life over again. I never complained about the lack of pay and made no demands for any reciprocity of any sort from either the school or the headmaster. This initial brief teaching engagement sparked a real interest in me for teaching. I started to enjoy what I was doing and because of this I forgot all about not being paid. My confidence in teaching grew and new aspirations began to stir within me.

At the beginning of 1985 school year, I was recruited formally by the Malaita Education Authority as an untrained teacher. I was posted to another isolated primary school. Despite being at a very remote school, I was so pleased to be employed that I forgot about the school's remoteness and isolation. I worked extremely hard to change my world and people's perceptions of me. I readily accepted work that other teachers did not enjoy doing. I willingly swept, cleared and weeded around the school compound with students, ran errands to nearby (several kilometres away) canteens to buy teacher's goods, cooked for the teachers I was living with, washed pots and plates, and travelled with students to their homes after school. In remote schools, students often walk several kilometres daily to and from school. Therefore teachers had to walk home with the young ones who lived the furthest away.

By showing my willingness to work and being respectful to the trained teachers I slowly changed people's perceptions, including those of my colleagues and superiors. People started to recognise potential in me. Other teachers, and even the headmaster, started delegating extra school curriculum responsibilities to me. Over the next two years as an untrained teacher, I worked with a very humble heart, with joy and excitement, and with cooperation and obedience to both the school authority and the controlling education authority.

I never opposed or rejected the directive of those in authority. A good example was in 1987 when I was assigned to be a relief teacher, with responsibilities to fill in for other teachers at various schools while they were away on leave. Over the course of the year, I taught in seven different

primary schools, some very far away from where I normally lived. Sometimes I would have to leave home as early as 5:30am in order to arrive at school on time. What did I learn from this experience? I learnt to accept responsibility and to work hard, faithfully and cheerfully. I also learnt people's perceptions of me began to change because of my demonstrated character. I believe this willingness and obedience were important factors in the Malaita Education Authority's decision at the end of 1987. I was selected as one of only ten untrained teachers, out of several hundred, to be recommended to do training for primary teaching qualifications at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE).

Back to school against all odds

I attended formal teacher training at SICHE from 1988 to 1989. During my first year of teacher training, I was given additional leadership responsibilities, being nominated by the school to be a sub-warden. While this was not a huge responsibility, I saw it as a great opportunity to develop leadership qualities and good practice for greater responsibilities in the future. During my first year, I was elected as the President of my ethnic student group (Central Malaita Students Association) at SICHE. I used this additional leadership responsibility as a training opportunity. In 1989, during my final year at SICHE, despite already having taken on leadership obligations, I enrolled for my first course at the University of the South Pacific (USP), via extension studies. It was hard work, because as well as the USP course I also had to ensure that I completed my teacher training successfully and performed my leadership roles. Through sheer dedication I managed to successfully complete my teacher training, and was awarded a Certificate in Teaching qualification. I also managed to complete my first extension course from the University of the South Pacific successfully.

I learnt to accept responsibility and to work hard, faithfully and cheerfully.

In 1990, despite my return to full time employment, for several reasons I continued to take USP extension courses. Firstly, I wanted to regain some of what I had lost academically through leaving secondary school early. Secondly, I was still sometimes compared negatively with others who had successfully completed their formal education. Thirdly, I had been encouraged by some of my SICHE college lecturers to continue to pursue further studies. I had developed a strong ambition to continue to pursue my education until I reached the highest academic levels.

"I have learnt that in order to bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step. We will fail when we fail to try. Each and every one of us can make a difference" (Rosa Parks, African American Civil Rights activist).

To serve is to lead

After graduating with my primary teaching qualification I completed my teaching probation in 1990 with the Malaita Education Authority. I continued to work extremely hard to show respect to my fellow teachers and headmaster. By working with respect, honesty and humility I was able to build good relationships with my colleagues and the local community. In 1991, my hard work paid off and I received my first promotion to Deputy Headmaster. Having just completed my probationary year, I had thought it would take some time before I would be considered ready for administrative responsibilities. Initially, I thought the promotion was unrealistic, because I was still in the process of learning and gaining experiences from my superiors. However, based on their observations and reports about my ability to handle higher responsibilities, the authorities saw it differently.

"... he whose heart is firm and whose conscience approves his conduct will pursue my principles until death" (Thomas Paine).

My advice: do not underestimate how challenging married life can be!

I therefore accepted the promotion and began to perform the duties of a deputy Headmaster. I held the position for two years, 1991 and 1992. In 1993 I was selected to take up a headmaster's position. I was a replacement for a substantive headmaster holder who had objected to taking up a position in a remote school. I believed that my past obedience and respect to the authorities resulted in this further promotion. Again, I was a bit hesitant at first, but after encouragement from my superiors, I accepted the offer and took up the headmaster's position in 1993.

Marriage experience

In October 2003, I married Lois, a girl from my home village. My village, outside the Malaita Provincial capital of Auki, is near the coast, but at the time I was still teaching at a village up in the mountains. As a single man, I would walk back up the mountains to the school after spending the weekend in my home village. Although it was very tiring to walk long distances on mountain bush tracks, I quite often enjoyed it. After my wife and I had spent our first weekend as a married couple in our village, we left to travel up the mountain to the school. In order to arrive at the school while it was still daylight, we should have started our journey around midday. However we actually left at about 2:00pm. Sure enough, darkness caught up with us while we were only three quarters of the way through our journey. The fall of darkness found us in thick forest, and to make things worse, we did not have a flashlight with us. Things started to get very difficult for me, but not because of the darkness or the length of the journey, but from my new wife. She was so frustrated by the circumstances that she became very upset. As is usual when a Malaitan woman is angry with her husband, she did not hold anything back. Although I received all sorts of comments that evening, I remained calm and kept on walking and encouraged my wife.

To our relief we soon reached a village, and some villagers with torches kindly accompanied us the rest of the way to the school. Although this story seems quite trivial, I remember it well for the lessons it taught me. First, when a person is single, it seems that challenges in life are not very complicated. But when one gets married, challenges seem more complicated as issues must be discussed and negotiated. My advice: do not

underestimate how challenging married life can be! Second, in married life it is important to stay calm when dealing with tensions with one's spouse. Calmness requires courage. Courage is based on experiential knowledge and strong moral values derived from God.

I became a headmaster not because of my experience and qualifications, but because of my behaviour and attitude towards work. I had learnt to be courageous, to show responsibility and to be impartial in all working relationships. I learnt to be respectful, determined and ethical in my professional conduct. I have based my professional conduct on a number of values. First, I readily admitted my personal weaknesses and was willing to learn from those in authority. Second, I respected the responsibilities entrusted to me and honoured my work obligations. Third, I learnt to build rapport and cordial working relationships with my teaching colleagues, school administrators, students and the local community. Fourth, I learnt to be dedicated, carrying out any incomplete and delegated tasks with a good heart. A verse from the Bible which kept me on track was: "...*humble yourself in the eyes of the Lord and he will lift you up*" (1 Peter 5:6). I learnt not to raise complaints against my colleagues or school authorities. I was able to build trust and respect with the people I worked with and served. This statement from a famous political leader helped me to work to my best: "*I am simply trying as best as I can and as fast as God gives me light to do the job I believe He has given me in trust to do.*" (George Washington).

I held the position of school headmaster from 1993 to 1995 when I was transferred to be headmaster of a school in my own community. It was a big challenge for me to return and become the leader of a school in my own community because people knew about my past behaviour and attitude. How I was able to deal with this new challenge? Again, through hard work and active demonstration of leadership I regained the respect of the community. Determined to change people's perspectives, I committed myself to the same basic principles that had served me well previously. A headmaster has to motivate stakeholders about the future vision for their school and the potential benefits of such a vision. I knew my village community very well and knew what they needed and why they were so reluctant to render much support to the school. I mobilised the school and the local community through a number of meetings, giving educational

talks about my vision for the school and what could be expected from the school stakeholders. This strategy seemed transparent and accountable which quickly changed the school stakeholders' perceptions of me – a new improved working relationship sprang up among teachers and students and nearly a hundred per cent turnout from parents were seen in response to requests from the school authorities for assistance.

The leadership that I was able to provide during that first year quickly changed peoples' perception about who I was. I became a recognisable figure in my community. My ability to mobilise and bring people together spoke volumes. My newfound abilities gave people confidence in me and they entrusted me with other community responsibilities. In time I became chairman of the village Water Supply Committee, the president of the local community sports club and a young leader of my tribe. I was also given the responsibility of chairing the organising committee for the World Teachers Day event in the Provincial capital, as well as chairing the primary school soccer league.

I came to be recognised as a new leader in the surrounding communities. I had to manage my time well in order to fulfil all my responsibilities and to see them work well. The programs I planned were successfully implemented, which further enhanced the recognition of my leadership abilities. My ethical approach to work also impressed the provincial education authority. I was selected from among thousands of fellow teachers, all serving under the education authority, to represent the province as a writer of the new national English curriculum for standards one, two, and three. Again, this was not because I was knowledgeable and intelligent, but because I had shown hard work and determination. My experience certainly supports the statement by my mentor that, "intelligence accounts for up to twenty per cent of one's success while the other 80 per cent is due to hard work, determination and persistence." I cannot agree more. In leadership, respect is something earned not given freely to a person. Respect by followers or a community of people is accorded to a leader over time and through acts of demonstrated credibility.

Higher education

I was given the opportunity to do a Diploma in Teaching in 1996. This was a huge opportunity for me. Under the normal selection criteria only candidates who have successfully completed form five with above average grades, or form six or seven were considered. I did not reach a form five education. Worse still, I didn't even have a form three leaver's certificate. My acceptance into a diploma qualification was like a dream come true. I was so amazed at being chosen from the many hundreds of potential candidates who had applied and aspired for such an opportunity. It seemed that my success in obtaining both a space at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education and a scholarship from the Solomon Islands Government was because of two reasons. Firstly, I was not afraid to try. I had the confidence, courage and great determination. Secondly, my leadership involvement, not only in my professional career but also in my community, had served to convince the selectors.

My college studies went very well, although I found it tough competing with fellow college students – most of whom had completed their formal secondary education. However, I persevered and managed to pass my courses. During my diploma years at SICHE, I participated actively in college activities. In 1997, my second year at college, I was elected to the position of President of the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education Student Association (SICHESA). That was by far the highest responsibility I had held in my life. I performed with great courage and determination and gained some recognition from the college authorities and the Government. I was selected among other potential candidates to represent Solomon Islands at a students' leadership forum in Australia. That was in April 1998, when I was still the President of the SICHESA. The opportunity was my first time to travel outside of the Solomons, as well as my first time to attend a formal leadership forum.

Upon returning from the leadership forum, I participated in a national leadership forum for secondary student leaders. This same year I presented a report on the leadership forum I had attended in Canberra, Australia. This was a highlight for me. I successfully completed my term in office as President of the Students Association and also successfully

completed my Diploma in Teaching Secondary at the end of 1998. So what does this tell us about leadership? Why was I able to achieve this? Hard work and dedication were the explanations for success. So, leadership is about hard work, dedication and focusing on the important things at that moment.

High school dropout becomes high school principal

I did my probation in secondary teaching in 1999. In 2000, I was given a secondary school principal posting in a community high school. Some of my colleagues asked why I was promoted so fast at the secondary level. I replied saying "I don't know!" The only thing I knew was to give my best at what I had been entrusted to do. I continued my good work as the leader of the high school and also found some time to continue with my extension studies. My ability to balance work and studies stems from my ability to manage my time. When other colleagues were off enjoying their time with their families and friends, I would most likely lock myself up in the house to do my studies. I always ensured I had plans for my work the next day and would read and work on my assignments. What helped me with my workload was the clear delegation and sharing of responsibilities with my work colleagues. I showed trust and respect to them and in return my colleagues reciprocated the same values to me. That made my job as leader much easier. I believed in the principles of cooperation and showing respect to people regardless of status, age, gender, or friendship. I believed also in the principle that those I worked with, and those I worked for, were the ones that would defend me and help me to achieve my vision.

Higher and higher education

I held the position of principal from 2000 to 2001. I also kept on going with my extension courses. By the end of 2001 I had managed to complete ten courses towards a USP Bachelor of Education. Only another ten more were required to complete the qualification. I applied for a scholarship to complete the required remaining units on campus in Suva and was successful. The Solomon Islands Government awarded me a three year scholarship. At the beginning of 2002, I left my family and travelled to

Fiji to continue my studies full-time at the University of the South Pacific. I managed to successfully complete my Bachelor of Education degree at the end of 2003, using only two years of my three years scholarship to complete the required remaining courses. In developing countries like Solomon Islands, to be offered a university scholarship is rare a privilege, given all the competition from thousands of other applicants, including high school graduates and in-service students.

My strength at the time was not from my formal academic accomplishments at SICHE, but the number of USP extension courses I had already completed through my own efforts. I had always paid for my own USP extension course fees. As well, I had put in the additional effort required to complete the courses despite having full time employment. I had felt from the beginning that one day all my sacrifice of time and money would pay dividends and help me achieve my dreams. I found work and studying very demanding and costly but, as I had learnt earlier, nothing under the sun comes without hard work. For me, leadership is about taking initiative. It is not about waiting for someone else to do something for you. It is not waiting for handouts from government or from others. It is about doing what one is able to do. Further, leadership is about dedication – staying true to the task at hand. Leadership is about focusing on the priority at hand. Leadership is about commitment to a goal, to a set of values, and to other people who are depending on you.

I become a headmaster not because of my experience and qualifications, but because of my behaviour and attitude towards work.

I returned directly to the rural area after arriving back from my university studies in 2004 and continued with my professional teaching career. I noticed upon returning from overseas that most of my colleagues liked to remain in town and had taken up work there. I was the only one to return to the rural area. Some of my friends asked me why I preferred working in the rural areas. I gave them several different excuses, but at the back of my mind I knew that the people in the rural areas needed my services. I now had a lot to offer to the rural population, who had very limited formal education. I took up another principal position in the rural area from

2004 to 2005. During those years I was elected President of the Malaita Provincial Rugby Union Association. I was also nominated to manage the Malaita provincial soccer squad. Both these responsibilities were provincial level obligations. Malaita Province is the biggest province in the Solomon Islands with a population of 130,000 people. To be recognized as a leader among such a huge population was a significant leadership step for me.

In 2006 I was posted as principal of Su'u National Secondary School, one of the most well recognised schools in the country. It was recognised for its high academic achievements, discipline and moral development. Su'u is located in a rather remote rural area of Malaita Province. Interestingly, it was also the same school that I had attended as a student and from which I had exited prematurely as a result of bad behaviour. I had come full circle and returned as the principal eighteen years later. It seemed a bit ironic, but in fact this was according to plan. I returned as the principal of the school against all odds. I, a school drop-out, could succeed regardless of what people thought of me.

In 2006 I also applied for a NZAID open category scholarship and to my pleasant surprise was offered a scholarship to do a Masters in Education degree at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. I was in a state of disbelief when I received acceptance. It was like a dream. I had considered developed country standards as so much superior and to obtain an offer of study for a Masters qualification from a metropolitan country was the greatest academic achievement possible. At the time of writing I have completed my first year with some good grades and I am currently working on my thesis.

On the 12th of July, 2008 I travelled back to the Solomon Islands to do my field work for my research. I was excited to be home again and to meet up with friends, colleagues and family members. It was also an opportunity to visit and check up on my family's properties. However, upon arrival in the Solomon Islands I was greeted with the saddest news of my life. My permanent dream house had been completely burned down by fire exactly ten hours before I arrived in the country. It was a huge shock for me because I had been building the house since I was young and single, and

had continued to improve on it throughout my career until it had become my dream house. This was the darkest moment of my life and the worst experience I had ever had. To have lost all that I had worked and toiled for over more than twenty years was devastating.

For a moment, life seemed pointless, especially when I began thinking about the effort, money and time I had put into building the house. I did not know what to do, but then I collected myself, "I am a leader." "How do I deal with this devastating blow so I am not defeated by my unfortunate circumstance? How do I respond to this problem so my research fieldwork can start and be completed properly? How do I respond to the people and individuals who may have had something to do with causing the fire? Or the people who were caring for my house? Or the relatives whose anger is boiling about my great loss?" I was able to calm myself down and calm the deep emotions of my family and community members. I was able to deal with the problem without creating further problems for myself or anyone else. I went to my village where I saw the remains of my destroyed house, dealt with the issues that arose and proceeded to complete my research.

Where did I get the courage and the character to deal with this trying situation? Did I learn from them at Vic? Did I just suddenly obtain the stamina to deal with a personal devastating loss? No. I was able to deal with my loss ethically because of the leadership lessons I learnt over the years. Even in that dark moment, I saw a fine beam of light which continued to shine – the light from the values I had developed since my humble beginnings. The values of courage, calmness, peace of mind and patience. I kept in mind, "He who has not known ill fortune, never knew himself or his virtue – for in adversity, a man is saved by hope."

In leadership, respect is something earned not given freely to a person. Respect by followers or a community of people is accorded to a leader over time and through acts of demonstrated credibility.

Upon reflection, I note that my Masters thesis is on citizenship education and had contributed to my reading on moral values, positive character traits and good citizenship. I saw my sad news as a test of what I had been exploring. Yet the feeling and experience of loss was still a great challenge for me to overcome. I recalled the comforting biblical words, "I can do all things through the strength given by God," and the powerful will that he had repeatedly given me to overcome challenges against all odds.

Final thoughts

Concluding my leadership life story, I note the sequence of key themes: beginning with early promise, followed by early failure, then recovery and then rebuilding, until finally exceeding all expectations, only to be struck once more with terrible adversity. That however, is not the end of my story.