

Behind the 'mad cookie'

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By LUISA TORA

SCRATCH every politician in the Cook islands and a would-be teacher, planter, lawyer or doctor is underneath.

Lately, considering the way politicians have been running the country, those secondary careers may yet get a chance as the government appoints a committee to look at the issue of trimming back on the number of seats in Parliament.

Lead in an article by Lisa Williams, headlined MAY DAY FOR THE COOKS MONEY CRISIS in *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1996.

IF WE scratched Lisaleilani Williams — Lisa to her friends — what would we find underneath? Friends and colleagues came up with an interesting list.

1999 Pacific Freedom of Information award-winner Maire Bopp says she is "a good example of a Pacific journalist". Robert Keith-Reid of *Islands Business* says "she's a mad cookie" and freelancer Jason Brown says she has "very professional bravery".

Knowing Lisa, she would brush all these descriptions aside — except perhaps Keith-Reid's. She might embrace that one.

Lisaleilani Williams, one of the region's leading freelance journalists and documentary makers, was in Suva for the October 1999 Pacific Islands News Association conference and she and her colleagues will be hosting 2000 PINA convention in Rarotonga.

She was born on 24 November 1967, the fourth child of George and Pepe Williams. She says threes are a recurring theme in her life: she has three brothers, three sisters and three sons.

“So that means I have another husband to go,” she laughs that trademark husky laugh of hers.

Her eyes get darker as she talks about her first relationship, where she bore her sons Daniel and Chubby.

“He would beat me in public and private, it didn’t matter. And through my tears, my mother would be standing there saying; ‘It’s

a woman’s life to feel pain’. That was my feminist moment. I thought, ‘Stuff this’ and left,” she says.

She is now married to Vainerere Vainerere, with whom she has a third son, Tahirii.

Her first job as a journalist came soon after being kicked out of school for having a boyfriend. She laughs when she recalls that she had paid up her exam fees, so she had to go back to sit her final exams.

At twenty, she was pregnant in an abusive relationship and working at a video rental shop. Romantic notions of being “an ologist” had long disappeared.

The man who ran the shop printed the Cook Islands Broadcasting and News Corporation (CIBC) newspaper at the time and when he saw her exam results he set up an interview for her.

“I was five months (pregnant) and visibly showing. So I wore a big jacket. Of course, I got the job and he never suspected,” she laughs. That was in February 1985.



Lisa Williams: Drive and tenacity.

Photo: WANSOLWARA

LUISA TORA

“It was an escape for me to do journalism. I could look at other people’s lives and it allowed me to be so busy I couldn’t concentrate on my own misery,” she says.

During this time she started working part-time as a DJ at Radio Kurangi (now KCFM). This allowed her to play the techno music she loves so much.

“The station manager would call me up and say ‘Turn off that bloody music. What are you trying to do to my station?’” she laughs.

Her part-time job led to covering overseas events like the South Pacific Forum and the South Pacific Games.

“It also got me around the Pacific really fast. Like you go into a country and it’s really intense. You don’t sleep for like two days just covering people and meeting other journalists, making sure that the people at home are kept up with the pace of the story.

“It’s really good stuff and then boom, you’re on a plane out of there. But that was the Forum thing. My learning curve was like ‘whoop’,” she says pointing up at the sky.”

She suffered her share of cadet-itis though.

“I would do everything wrong. I would turn up to things with no pen, no notebook and no microphone, like ‘here I am’. Everything I could do wrong technically, I did,” she says.

Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association journalist Hendrick Ketner changed all this when he took her under his wing. “I cried, girl, I cried. He put me through all this stress. But you know, I love him for it.”

Things moved swiftly once she had found her feet. In 1987, she spent nine months with the Tourism Department, “doing copywriting and marketing”. When Government privatised her paper in 1989, she moved to the Government’s Media Information Department and “got to see what Government officials thought of the media which was very little and how they thought the media could help them with their job and keep people informed which was very little again”.

In 1990, she studied applied communication at the University of Western Sydney where she said Marx made her cry and she “blew (her) mind on famous Western feminists”. But she hated it.

“It was just a whole new world and I wrote to my sponsors and I asked that they send me home on the grounds of cultural isolation,” she says.

She was the only Islander at the university and “almost jumped through the roof when this guy came over from Papua New Guinea. He thought I was mad.”

It was that year that she got the distinctive Cook Islands tattoo around her right forearm. She rubs it gently as she speaks of it.

She was first faced with the Pacific Journalist Dilemma while studying in Auckland.

“I really envied the papa’a (Europeans). I thought, ‘God, they can go out and get the story done and not have to be worried about being related to the story and having to eat with the story and go home with the story’.

“I mean we have to deal with all these dilemmas and at the end, there is still one simple fact, you have to go out and get the story,” says Lisa.

“And then there’s gender, you know, after a twelve hour slog you have to go home and there’s your husband who hates you because you haven’t cooked and really — you gotta get the story!”

It is this drive that has won Lisa the respect and admiration of many friends and colleagues.

“She goes for the stories, she’s not trying to show off, she’s not going for the headlines,” says Bopp.

Cook Islands Television news director Nanette Wontoon says: “As far as I know, there are many journalists politicians don’t talk to. She hasn’t had that problem. Although people are not happy with her stories, they still respect her because she puts her story out.”

This tenacity continues after hours, Jason Brown will tell you.

“We were in this bar once and the AG (Attorney General) and his sons came in. One of them came over and started abusing the shit out of me. He was just inches from my face and Lisa just pushed him away and started arguing with him.

“I just looked at him. Then I looked at her, like ‘Gee thanks, Lisa’, didn’t have to say a word!” he laughs.

□ *Luisa Tora is a final-year University of the South Pacific journalism student. She writes a film review column for Fiji’s Sunday Times and reports for FM96 radio. An earlier, shorter, version of this article was first published in a special media edition of USP’s journalism training newspaper, Wansolwara, in November 1999.*