

'OP' - chief with big heart

'The editor of the *Solomon Star*, John Lamani, says Oseah Philemon's style of writing is very direct and always has the feel of the common people.'

By TOMASI RAIYAWA

HE'S BIG, gentle and smartly dressed. Oseah Philemon — known as "OP" to his closest friends — carries an air of authority, but in that big frame of his is a big heart.

A heart that cares for his relatives and those he serves in the organisation and to those to whom he is obligated to report the truth ... the people.

Philemon is married to Pauline and together they have seven children. Four belong to them and three are adopted.

The adopted children belong to relatives and according to him, they are "just helping" their relatives, a practice common among Pacific Islanders.

Philemon is a native from Lae who immediately became a journalist after leaving high school in 1971. He wanted to become a radio broadcaster and got a job at Radio Morobe which is now part of the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC).

His initial job lasted only six months as a broadcast officer trainee when the Department of Information and Extension Services selected young broadcast officers with potential in writing to become radio journalists. He was one of the first selected under that scheme.

When the National Broadcasting Commission took over from the PNG Australia Broadcasting Commission (ABC) network, Philemon was transferred there. As part of his training, he got posted to a radio station due to recognition given to his work.

“In 1978, I was seconded to the Prime Minister’s Office to assist the press secretary for two years and then I was posted back to NBC,” says Philemon. This time he was put into the research department related to radio programmes for 18 months.

Station manager

Philemon was then chosen by the chairman of NBC to be the station manager of his local radio station in Lae.

After 18 months he was called back to Port Moresby and was assigned to programmes. As director of programmes, his operation lasted only two years before he was appointed director of news and current affairs at NBC, a position he held less than 12 months.

“Around March 1985, I joined the *Post-Courier* as a chief-of-staff for 12 months. After which I was sent up to Lae. I’m from Lae and was assigned there because the *Post-Courier* was experiencing competition from *Niugini Nius*,” Philemon says.

“The message I was given by my boss, the editor Luke Sela, and general manager Don Kennedy, was for me to go and make sure that we boost our circulation. It was a very tall order to carry out.”

“I had to work 12 hours a day and we made a deal that Lae stories be given first priority in the papers.”

Philemon’s persistence paid off eventually. He was in Lae for seven years. Eventually, the *Niugini Nius* was closed down by the owner, Australian airline businessman Sir Dennis Buchanan.

“While in Lae our circulation boosted from just a few copies to more than 6000 which was a big ... big achievement by the *Post-Courier*.”

Career boost

The success boosted Philemon’s career. Not long after his return to Port Moresby in 1991 to take up his old position as chief-of-staff, he was made editor of the *Post-Courier*.

“One evening while I was working, I was called to the general manager’s office. There and then I was bluntly told that I was the new editor of the *Post-Courier* since my predecessor had moved on to another job. [Luke Sela had become administrative manager and retired at the end of 1999].”

The promotion was surprising as he was not keen on becoming an editor but



Oseah Philemon: Lae success helped career.

Photo: WANSOLWARA

he felt it was a result of his loyalty to the organisation.

“I had to learn this job from the beginning, especially coming from a radio background. Even after seven years of reporting, I was still learning from scratch. I had to find my own way around.”

The editor of the *Solomon Star*, John Lamani, says Oseah Philemon’s style of writing is very direct and always has the feel of the common people.

Philemon says he had strong reader supporters who always commended his pieces. He remembers writing a common piece which raised the ire of former prime ministers Sir Michael Somare and Paiaf Wingti.

“The story was about Parliament. At that time Sir Julius Chan was the Prime Minister and Sir Michael Somare was the Minister of Finance.

“I commented on Sir Michael’s failure to block the Budget by allowing it to be passed without debate.

Angry response

“Of course, the budget would eventually pass but Parliament has every right to debate it.”

“The next day, Sir Michael rang and he was very angry. I told him back, ‘Put it in writing, sir’. He never did.”

At the October 1999 convention of the Pacific Islands News Association in Suva, Philemon spoke about new technology, emphasising that newspapers will never be replaced by new technology.

His newspaper had the first classified website in the Pacific and the news

site has since been revamped.

Philemon says technology was there just to enhance and expedite production efficiently.

His love for journalism and journalists as well is commendable.

In Suva, Philemon was elected to the newly created post of PINA vice-president.

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