

Behind the gold medals

'The culture of silence that engulfs most Fijian students needs to be discouraged. And those who have failed must remember that there is nothing wrong with failure — but there is plenty wrong in giving up.'

By ANDREA WAQA*

EXCELLING in virtually everything she embarks upon, Wainikiti Waqa is the inspiration Pacific Islanders need. Waqa has worked her way up from reporter to editor and also topped academic standards at the University of the South Pacific, graduating with four gold medals in 2000 while working as a subeditor at Fiji's Daily Post. She was appointed acting editor for The Sun in February 2001 but resigned in July when offered a scholarship to work towards her masters degree.

You were a subeditor and also a part-time student, how did you balance your work schedule?

I worked in the afternoons so I chose courses that were held in the morning. For my core classes, I had no choice but to attend whenever I was required. But Jale [Moala, then *Daily Post* editor] worked out a schedule for me that was a win-win situation for me and the company.

Four gold medals. People will be saying, wow, being a Fijian and also a mother, how did you do it, especially with the other commitment to family?

My husband gave me insurmountable support. So too did my sisters, my brothers, my sister-in-law, my parents. I would come home and the food would be ready, house cleaned, the little one (a daughter) washed, dined and in bed. One of the first things my husband did, after I enrolled at USP, was to buy me

* *The two Waqas are unrelated.*

a computer. Then because I had to travel from home-work-university-work-home, we decided to invest in a car. But generally, my family have to take a lot of credit. I had decided on the first week of my first semester in 1998 that I will get three gold medals — I stayed focused. It's easy if you really work towards it. That I got an extra one was a pleasant surprise. But it became a family joke — they will say, "don't disturb her she is trying to get her gold medal".

How did you discipline yourself in regards to your work and friends who could be a distraction for you?

I enjoyed being distracted. I think that at some time, the distractions kept me sane. I would go along with my friends and yarn and drink grog until wee hours of the morning when a major assignment was due next day. But everything has its limits and at times you just have to say "no" when you know that your study schedules are way behind.

Why did you want to further your education, and how did you get your scholarship?

Almost everyone I know has a BA. So I wanted to get an MA — and I didn't want to do it at USP. I felt that I needed to branch out and further my horizons. There was also high expectation from those back home for me to seek out a higher degree. My study at University of Hawai'i is actually funded by the US government under the Pacific Islands Development Programme. It was actually advertised in the local newspapers and I was reminded about it again when I visited Scott MacWilliam's (USP history/politics associate professor) room the day before it was due. So I ran around, compiled and complied with the



Wainikiti Waqa: Persistence and a family joke.
Photo: USP BULLETIN

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requirements needed, faxed my application and followed up by sending everything by mail.

Many people don't realise that you are the first Fijian, in fact the first Fijian woman to receive any gold medal and four for that matter. How do you feel about that? When you were studying did you have that in mind to win four gold medals?

I am not sure about being the first Fijian woman to win a gold medal. What I know is that I am the first Fiji Islander to get four gold medals. I suppose I was happy about it at first — to be exact, I was on another world but I had to come back to earth. I am normally a very down-to-earth person. I am honoured that I am recognised for something other than being a journalist. I hope that other students, especially Fijians, may be inspired by my achievements and would go out there and get five medals. It's not tough — all it needs is dedication.

Many Fijian students on campus are on scholarship and after the first semester this year many of them have lost their scholarship because they didn't perform well for them and for the standards of the FAB scholarship board. What advice can you give to students in regards to discipline with school work and assignments?

Fijian students who come to USP suffer because the transition from school to university life is so difficult for them to handle. I am talking from experience. What is needed is a change in our education system in schools. It is too exam-oriented. Perhaps throughout the year continuous assessment should be encouraged so that student can adapt to university life.

Some of the Fijian students that don't do well in uni. are probably very bright students, who studied too late — and really did not put much effort in their course work. At the same time, most are tasting freedom from home for the first time. Their social life prospers while their academic life takes a nose-dive.

Then there is peer pressure. The students need to manage their time well, they need to say no to some social activities, they need to be moderate, they need to balance their life so that they get the best of everything.

This is my opinion, it's not gospel ... but moderation is the key. They must stay focused, remember why they are at USP and prioritise their needs. Often Fijian students don't talk in class. The culture of silence that engulfs most Fijian students needs to be discouraged.

Then again, those who have failed must remember that there is nothing wrong with failure — but there is plenty wrong in giving up.

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