

On the bright side

There were also funny incidents during the Speight coup and we needed to laugh to see things. Netani Rika did that for many people and it was a good laugh. Sometimes the most complicated things of all can be the best laugh, it just needs somebody to say it or write it.

By TALEI TORA

HE'S MOTIVATED by bad leadership and social justice. He didn't want to go to university because he didn't want his younger brother to graduate before him. He's been threatened with having his house burnt down, he's been interviewed by 60 Minutes, and he's also been told that he's "full of shit".

He is Netani Rika, formerly Fiji Times acting editor and "On the Bright Side" columnist, who recently joined Fiji Television as news director.

I chose him as my profile subject because his column takes the mickey out of things political — and just about everything else too.

He's funny, very funny actually. During the George Speight coup the newspapers were filled with hard news and then came Saturday's "On the Bright Side"— a good laugh, good reading and food for thought.

I've always wanted to know how he has the courage to write and "make fun" of people and issues and just basically say what no-one else has the guts to say.

10:58 am, outside the Fiji Times office. I was directed into the news room and immediately looked for Matelita Ragogo's familiar face. She had set up the Tuesday morning interview for me.

I could barely make her out behind a desk that was too big for her, but she yelled a "wooo!!" and I smiled back with a "thank you" dopey grin.

In the office, such a neat office too, he asked me to grab a seat. Sitting very straight in my chair and straining to hear because I have a deaf left ear, I began my interview.

Law and disorder



EVILLY day the long arm of the law appears to grow shorter and shorter. Robbers break into homes with impunity. Taxi drivers lose their incomes in the middle of the night. Prostitution is rife on the streets. And on the park benches, in alley ways, seedy motels and along the beach waterfront. Millions brawl in the bus stand of the nation's capital and drink to the nightclubs when they should be behind their books or under their blankets. Drugs seduce ply their persuasive trade (sell sections of the community including children. After hours the black marketeers do a thriving business. Their customers range from the rich and famous to the ordinary bus driver, prostitute, office worker and policeman. The wonder who the police

a. In Honiata
b. On a PM exercise at Suva
c. Drinking yagona in the station bars
d. Beating a suspect senseless in the crime office. You will notice that there is one aspect upon which we have not focused. That is petty jealousy. In fact, next week an officer goes before the tribunal because he dared question a superior who did not follow standing orders. The superior, in this case, was wrong. All he had to do was write out the appropriate order, channel them through the correct officers and his command would have been carried out. But no. Because he was questioned the officer framed his subordinate and sent him to court for stealing a goat. The goal, in this case, was to win a farm in Suva. It never moved within an inch of a shopper or a carry out. During office hours, of course.



Foot patrol — police officers on the beat in Suva

So as one arm of the law grows shorter and shorter the other grows longer by the minute. That's why one hand has no idea what the other is doing

Can you please introduce yourself and what you do at the Times?

State my name, rank and number (laughs), I'm Netani Rika, I'm the acting editor of the *Fiji Times*. I've been here since 1 July 1988 and I hope to die here — yeah I love it.

How did you become a journalist?

I've always had a love of writing, current affairs, meeting people and travelling has always been something I've enjoyed. My father being a teacher, we travelled a lot and grew to love and appreciate differences in the country, differences in people and their cultures, their food (smiles). I got a job with the bank upon leaving school in 1984, then there was the coup and newspapers had always been part of our lives and the radio and journalism suddenly took on a new and exciting prospect, I suppose.

There was an advertisement for reporters in the middle of 1987, just after the coup because a lot of senior staff of the *Fiji Times* started to leave, but it wasn't until 1988 that I joined.

I started off as a cadet on a measly salary of \$5000. To be fair I think I joined at the right time. There were a few gaps created by people who had left.

How do you reconcile having an opinion column and being deputy editor



Netani Rika: Plenty of threats.

Photo: *FUJI TIMES*

of your own newspaper?

The opinion column is my personal view. It's personal, that's me, Netani, not Netani the deputy editor. I suppose it's difficult for some people outside of the *Fiji Times* to reconcile the difference between someone who also writes the editorial column on almost a daily basis.

In the column I have the chance to express what is my opinion on a certain aspect and that may not be the opinion of the paper itself.

A good journalist is able to separate himself or herself from personal opinion and the newspapers, and also what is hard news and what is opinion. And you should be able to write a hard news story even though you disagree with the opinion of those who are stating their opinion in your story.

If you are unable to do that, then you should get out.

Why political satire?

(Laughs) One influence from school, "The Man of the People", was the satire that we studied, combined with the fact that in the pre-television days, families talked a lot.

I think it's the best way to approach certain issues in this country, some things people know, they all know and they don't want to address certain issues head on, so the way to go about it is to use this.

What motivates you to write your column?

Social justice, intense desire for a unified nation. For people to be united we must, I think, realise first that we are different. We are different, there's no denying that, but in these differences there should be unity in diversity.

Unfortunately when you raise issues such as this, people on both sides consider you sometimes to be a racist.

I don't think of myself as a racist. I'm also motivated by bad leadership and bad leadership in a Fijian context.

INDEX

Fijians are so willing to be led like sheep, like blind people. They jump on every “fangled” thing that comes into town. I fail to understand. I want Fijian people to think for themselves.

What kind of responses do you get from different people, people on the streets, politicians, other journalists?

Hate, fear, envy, respect. Over the course of writing there have been threats against me, threats against the newspaper, and threats against my family.

At the same time, the one I like the best was when I was sitting in the bus in Navua on a Saturday, market day. This grumpy old man sitting across the street from the bus looked up and saw me on the bus.

He strode across and I thought he was going to give me an earful.

He said, “you are Netani Rika?” and I said yes.

And he stuck his hand through the window and said “thank you very much”.

I was pleasantly surprised. So from people who call you on the phone to say I’m going to come and burn your house to a person like that.

Certain people meet me on the street and say, “thank you”, for saying what we can’t say. And there are people who come up and tell me that I’m full of shit.

You joined the Fiji Times, post-coup. Second time round you were in the media, what was that like for you?

I wish I had been around in 1987. You always think with the benefit of hindsight, I could have done it this way. But we have to realise that the military came up and had the means to cut off everything, therefore journalists would have been working under different situations.

The 2000 coup was something new for local journalists, a few of the journalists were still in primary or secondary school during the first coup, but they did a good job.

People were given the correct information and were not left to think up answers on their own.

However, there were also funny incidents and we needed to laugh to see things .

Netani Rika did that for many people and it was a good laugh. Sometimes the most complicated things of all can be the best laugh, It just needs somebody to say it or write it.

□ *Talei Tora is a final-year journalism student at the University of the South Pacific and also an officer cadet with the Fiji Military Forces. This article was originally published in the April 2002 edition of Wansolwara. tjtora@yahoo.com*